スレイヤーズすぺしゃる⑳

ミッション・ポシブル

神坂　一

イラスト　あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 20

Mission Possible

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson
(March 2026)

For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Translator's Special Note: The first chapter of this volume is a must read for Lina's back story.

Runaway Girl [Part 1]

Wh... what are you doing!?"
The sound of something collapsing and a woman's scream came from behind.

Several oranges were rolling down the street. A woman was frantically trying to gather them up.

Right before her reaching hand—

Squish.

One of the oranges was crushed under a boot.

The one who did it was one of a group of four men who looked like total thugs.

"Hey. Old lady. Who gave you permission to sell your stuff here?"

Thud.

Before the man could even finish his delusional tough-guy talk, the tip of my jumping kick slammed directly into his temple.

"......Wh....."

While the other three stood there in stunned silence…
“Circumstances aside…”
I grabbed a small chunk of the crushed orange with my fingertips and lifted it up.
"Didn't anyone ever teach you that it's wrong to waste food?"

"Hah? What's that, you brat... don't mess with me!" yelled Thug Number Two as he lunged at me.

I shifted my feet with a quick *sh-zip*—and the moment his attention flickered toward my movement, I hurled the remains of the orange right at his eyes.

Reflexively, the man swatted it away. But in that split second when his own hand and the orange blocked his vision—*Thump!*

I lunged into his personal space, burying a kick deep into his solar plexus. Thug Number Two flew backward and rolled across the ground.

"You...! Why you...!"

"Doing something interesting, are we..."

"Fire Lance!"

Vwoom!

The offensive spell I fired slammed into the ground right at the feet of the remaining two, freezing them in their tracks.

"The next one hits," I said quietly. Greasy sweat began to bead on the men's foreheads.

"...A... a sorcerer...?" one of them managed to rasp out.

Honestly, you're a bit slow on the uptake, mister. You'd think a girl in a flowing black cloak adorned with magical amulets would be a dead giveaway.

Anyway—"Now, I have a question for you," I said flatly to the frozen men. "Regarding the compensation for that orange: would you rather hand over every cent you've got, or be turned into human torches that aren't even useful for light since it's the middle of the day?"

"What did you say?!"

"You little—don't get too cocky—"

"Which will it be?"

"....."

The men fell silent at my question. And so, I handed half of the total assets I'd confiscated from them to the lady at the shop and went on my way.

"Thank you for earlier."

I looked up at the voice while I was in a certain eatery. I was currently in the middle of hopping from shop to shop for a light afternoon snack. Standing across the table was a single woman around forty. Her black hair, parted in the middle, was fraying in places. Her everyday clothes were well-washed but had a worn-out feel. She wore a gentle smile, though it seemed to carry a sense of enlightened resignation.

She looked like a kind-hearted woman exhausted by the grind of daily life. She was slender, but the atmosphere clinging to her made her look more haggard than anything else. I fell silent for a moment—

"—Ah. From before."

It took a few beats for me to remember who she was. She was the woman from the fruit stand who had been harassed by those punks in town.

"No, no. It was nothing major."

"No. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't helped me..." As she spoke, the woman remained standing there, fidgeting in silence.

...Hmm... this is...

"—Well, please, have a seat."

"...Alright..."

At my urging, the woman sat down across the table—and fell silent again.

"—You have something to talk to me about, don't you?"

At my prompting, she gave a quick bow. "...I've been slow to introduce myself... My name is Karsha Ridepark. I make a living running a small orchard in the neighboring village of Pramis."

"I'm Lina Inverse. As you can see, I'm a traveling sorcerer."

After we finished our introductions, the woman stared blankly at the tabletop and finally began to speak in a low murmur.

"...The truth is... I know it is incredibly brazen of me to ask this of someone who has already helped me... I am fully aware of that... but there is something... I absolutely must ask your help with..."

"Is it about those guys from before?"

When I asked, Karsha shook her head weakly. "...I have a daughter named Marlene, who turns fifteen this year... I intended to raise her with the utmost care... but perhaps she grew tired of our tedious life... she started hanging out with a bad crowd... and finally, the other day, she left home..."

She let out a deep, weary sigh.

—However, I felt like sighing just as much. A request from a woman exhausted by life who was being harassed by thugs. I had fully expected a request like, "Please beat up some nasty thugs. You can confiscate their property as you like." I never expected to be mediating a parent-child spat... It's a family matter to begin with.

Still, given her desperate appearance and the fact that I was the one who prompted her to talk, it was hard to say, "Actually, I don't want to hear it."

"...Mmm..." I scratched my head.

"—I know. I know that this is our family's problem—" Karsha said, as if seeing right through my thoughts. "Ultimately, this can only be resolved by Marlene and me talking and coming to an understanding. But... well, if we can't even get the chance to talk..." She looked down.

"So, you're saying your daughter won't see you—or rather, that 'bad crowd' won't let her?"

She gave a small nod. "In that case, I'm helpless on my own... That's why... well, I was wondering if you, Miss Lina, could help me create an opportunity for my

daughter and me to speak... Of course, I will offer a reward, however small it may be..." She lowered her head until it was practically pressed against the table.

...Mmm... The truth was, it was a request I wasn't particularly excited about, but when asked head-on by someone radiating such a sense of tragedy and desperation, it was hard to refuse. Well, I'd just scare those punks a bit and then leave it to the mother and daughter. It might not be so bad to go along with something like this once in a while.

Sigh.

I let out a small breath and gave her a wry smile. "...Fine. If that's all you need."

"...Thank you... thank you so much..." she said over and over in a tearful voice, still bowed over the table.

The forest was thick with the scent of greenery. The cries of beasts, birds, and insects filled the air, along with the rustling of leaves. The two of us moved through this flood of sound and presence.

"I'm sorry, Miss Lina. It's just a little further." Karsha spoke apologetically as she walked through the brush without making a sound.

"...No... it's fine..."

Giving a vague response, I was still repeating the same question to myself.

—Just where and how did things go so wrong?—

The cause of the dissonance I felt was obvious. It was, well—because of Karsha's outfit.

Currently, she was covered from head to toe in clothes patterned with blotches of black, dark green, and light brown. Her face was stained green and black with plant juice and charcoal. In her hand, she held a thick, single-edged sword whose silver blade had been blackened with soot.

By the way, if she crouched near a bush in that outfit, you wouldn't be able to tell her apart from the trees from ten paces away.

It was a pretty extreme look... but what threw me off most was that Karsha's weary smile somehow looked strangely natural in that gear. Furthermore, when she wore that smile in that outfit, it stopped looking like a "smile of a woman weary of life" and started looking like a "please don't make me kill any more people. Seriously. I'm sick of this too" kind of smile, which was terrifying.

Anyway, it's never good to head into battle with doubts or lingering hesitations. I decided to just ask. "...By the way, Karsha... what's with that outfit...?"

"—Oh my—" At my words, she began to fidget. "Does it not suit me? You see, these are clothes I used to wear when I was younger. I was worried if I could still fit into them. Please don't stare so much. It's embarrassing."

Apparently, she was shy about it. ...Her face was green, so I couldn't tell if she was blushing, but—

"But wearing these clothes really brings back memories." Karsha signaled me to stop with her hand as she skillfully disarmed some kind of tripwire made of fine thread hidden in the grass. "Back when I was young... back when people still called me the 'Hyena of Raltigue'."

"The... Hyena...? Not a lion or a leopard...?" That name had a rather delicate nuance to it.

"Oh, stop it, Miss Lina. That was a long time ago. A long time ago." Karsha stood up and waved her hands. I couldn't tell if the gesture meant she was just embarrassed or if it was a signal for "Trap disarmed. Continue advancing."

...Who... who exactly is this woman...?

True, a person's appearance doesn't always match their abilities or personality. For some reason, no one believes me lately, but even I would be seen as a lovely, delicate girl if I wore proper clothes instead of this sorcerer's outfit. In fact, back when I was in my hometown, quite a few guys approached me saying things like, "Lina, I'll protect you."

...Well... to test those words, most of those guys ended up crying to my older sister immediately after my "practical skills test," saying, "Please protect me from Lina"...

Thinking about it that way, I suppose it wouldn't be strange if Karsha, who looked so weary of life, used to be a soldier or something... I think...

"...B-but... with a background like that, those four punks in town shouldn't have been a problem at all..." I asked as we resumed our advance. She gave her usual gentle smile.

"Yes. But my way of doing things is a bit... well... I felt it would be a little pitiful to do *that* to people who just knocked over a stall..."

...Just what exactly were you planning to do to them?! No, I'm too scared to ask...

"So, when you said 'I don't know what would have happened,' you didn't mean to yourself, but to the other guys?"

"No, no. I meant to *me*. If I reverted to my old self, it would make getting along with the neighbors quite difficult."

"...H-huh... I see..."

"—Ah, Miss Lina, I'm sorry, but please keep your head down. We're almost there."

At her word, I lowered my body, and as we continued for a while longer, what eventually appeared beyond the brush was—well... how should I put it...

It was a fortress.

"...Uh... what is this place...?"

"Yes. Apparently, it used to be an old fort. Now it serves as the headquarters for the Nelrone Family."

"...The Ne..."

The Nelrone Family. They were a massive criminal syndicate famous in these parts.

"...Wait, by any chance, is that 'bad crowd' your daughter is hanging out with...?"

"Yes. Those people. ...Oh, come to think of it, I hadn't mentioned that yet. Silly me. Tee-hee."

...No... I'd prefer if you didn't dismiss such a fatally important detail with a "silly me"...

A small, dilapidated fortress is something I could pulverize instantly with a single spell, but I couldn't very well blow up Karsha's daughter—Marlene—along with it. If that was the case, the enemy's numbers would be a bit of a headache.

Seemingly unconcerned by such things, Karsha said in her usual leisurely tone, "So, Miss Lina, I'd like you to hurl a maximum-power Fireball into the second window from the bottom of the tower on the right side from here."

She made a severe request quite casually. ...Um... that window looks like the size of a grain of sand from here... Well, I could probably manage if I adjusted the spell and controlled its flight path... but a normal person couldn't do that.

"The tower itself is quite dilapidated and apparently isn't being used now, but if a Fireball detonates inside there, the tower should collapse under its own weight onto the main building. And according to my information, the area below the collapse should be where the organization's living facilities are concentrated. Like the dining hall. If we bring the tower down at this exact time, I think we can reduce about sixty percent of their fighting force. Don't you think it's a wonderful idea? So, Miss Lina, please."

"...No... well... putting aside that slightly gruesome plan... where did you get that kind of info... and I was wondering if it might be bad if your daughter was down there..."

"Oh my. You're worried, aren't you? But it's fine. The info is from a reliable informant, and according to them, my daughter shouldn't be in that area at this time."

"...I... I see..."

I had a mountain of things to nitpick, and I felt strongly that something was wrong, but for some reason, I didn't feel like protesting. I just gave a vague response.

"Let's see. If you could occasionally cast attack spells here and there... or if possible, summon a stone golem to go on a rampage... in short, it's enough if you can appropriately distract everyone. In the meantime, I'll go look for my daughter and have a little chat. Oh, but please don't do anything reckless like jumping out in front of everyone."

I felt like picking a fight with a criminal organization just to talk to your daughter was already pretty much the definition of reckless...

"—Alright, I'm starting."

Contrary to my thoughts, those were the words that came out of my mouth. I chanted the modified spell—

"Fireball!"

The light orb I released made a few course corrections and flew right through the window Karsha had pointed out—

CRASH! CRUNCH! ROAR!

Explosion, collapse, a massive roar. Amidst the lingering echoes and rising dust, I noticed that Karsha, who had been beside me, was already gone.

"...Well then. Time for some support, I guess."

I chanted a spell again—

"Bu Brimer!"

I interfered with the earth spirits, giving temporary life to the surrounding soil and stones to create a stone golem. I pointed sharply at the collapsed tower and gave a command to the newly born giant of stone.

"Advance over there! Go wild!"

I watched the back of the golem as it stomped away with heavy footsteps in response to my command, then I created Golem Number Two. Once that was done, Golem Number Three.

...Well, this should be enough for now.

Leaving the job of frontal distraction to the golems, I circled around to the side of the building.

—Or rather, I *tried* to circle around.

But at that moment, I felt a presence like a sliver of cold air—in other words, bloodlust.

The moment I instinctively stopped in my tracks—*sh-zing!*

A flash of silver light descended from the heavens, carving an afterimage into the empty space before me. Simultaneously, I leaped backward to create distance from my opponent.

Before me stood a single swordsman. In her hand was a longsword. Judging by the presence she radiated, she wasn't someone I could take lightly.

"—Who are you?"

She directed a gaze like a bird of prey at me, her question thick with bloodlust.

"...Does it matter?" I said, measuring the distance.

"Your objective?"

Presumably, the opponent, knowing I was a sorcerer, was asking questions to catch me off guard with my own words and close the distance in one go. If so, I would use words to shake her up.

"Does the name Marlene Ridepark mean anything to you?"

Twitch.

My words definitely caused a flicker of agitation in the swordsman.

"Who are you—" the swordsman repeated her question. This time, it was laced with both agitation and interest. "Why—do you know my name?"

"Is it you?" I furrowed my brows slightly. The female swordsman before me—she had a mature bearing, but she looked to be about fifteen or sixteen. It matched what I'd heard. Her hair, cut short, was black like Karsha's. Looking closely, her features also bore a resemblance to her.

Then—this was Karsha's daughter, Marlene?

Still without letting my guard down, I said, "Karsha asked me to come. She said she wants to talk to you."

The moment I said that—

Shake.

Shake. Shake, shake-shake-shake-shake-shake!

"M-m-m-m-m-m-mother is here?! Here?!" Suddenly, the female swordsman—Marlene—began to tremble violently.

"...Yeah... probably around there somewhere..."

"GYAAAAAAAH!" She tossed her sword aside, grabbed her head, and curled up in the grass.

"...Um... hey..."

The moment I spoke, she sprang up! She closed the distance between us in an instant, grabbed me by the collar with teary eyes, and yelled, "You! Why did you do this to me?! Do you hate me that much?! Is that it?! Dammit, just kill me now!"

"...Hey...! Calm down! What are you talking about?!"

"What do you mean?! It's fine for you, you don't know what Mother is like! After I risked everything to run away from her and get taken in by this organization, and you didn't even care—!"

"...Wait... you mean..."

"It's going to start again! Those days of education at Mother's hands! Training like driving away brown bears with just a glare under the guise of 'emotional education through contact with animals,' or being forced into ten-day survival training in the mountains in winter under the theme of 'contact with nature'!"

So... that's it...

Listening to Marlene's lament, I felt like all the mysteries had been solved.

"Do you have any idea what it's like for those days to continue?!"

I looked quietly at her, messy with tears, snot, and sweat, and said, "...I know."

"Liar! There's no way you could know!"

"I *do* know! I really do!"

Marlene's movements froze for a moment at my sudden outburst. I quietly looked away.

"...Because... my older sister back home... used to put me through stuff like that all the time..."

Yes. That was it. Despite having all sorts of doubts and questions about Karsha's words and actions, why had I followed her without any real protest or resistance? The reason was now perfectly clear.

In other words—they were similar. My sister back home and Karsha. Of course, they looked completely different. But their atmosphere, their mannerisms, their "leisurely and polite but gruesome" words and actions—there was something fundamentally common between them.

That's why—

"Wait a minute!" At my words, Marlene closed in on me again, still with teary eyes. "If you really understand how I feel, then why did you bring Mother here knowing that?!"

...*Haaaah*... I let out a deep, deep sigh at her question and patted her on the shoulder.

"...Then you should understand, right? Whether you can actually defy that type of person?"

"...*Guh*... I understand all too well..."

We both let out a sigh at the same time. Then, at that moment—

"—There they are!"

"Over there!"

"Kill them!"

I looked toward the voices and saw about five or six men from the organization running toward us from the collapsed building.

"Sorry, I'm busy right now. Fireball."

KABOOM!

After blowing them all away for the time being, I turned back to her.

"—I understand, Marlene."

"You understand what?!" she asked in a tearful voice. I looked straight into her eyes—and spoke.

"This is a wall that you—no, that both you and I have to overcome."

Once upon a time, my original motive for wanting to become a sorcerer was because I wanted my sister to acknowledge me, and because I wanted to win against her. My setting out on a journey was also due to her words: "Go see the world."

People like that appear in one's life sometimes—though not for everyone. Someone who has a massive influence on your life. Someone you must overcome.

For Marlene, that person was Karsha. And perhaps my being involved in this incident wasn't a mere coincidence. It had meaning. I couldn't help but feel that way.

In other words, this was—well, a kind of model, or a rite of passage, for the time when I would eventually challenge and overcome my sister. I couldn't help but feel that.

If so, the path I should take was—

"—I'll help you."

"...Eh...?" Marlene stared at me blankly at my words.

"Listen well. Suppose I hadn't helped Karsha today and hadn't shown up here. Could you have kept running from Karsha for the rest of your life? The answer is no. Someone else might help her someday. She might come on her own. The organization's protection won't last forever. Do you want to spend your entire life living in fear of Karsha's shadow? What's your answer?"

"....." Marlene remained silent for a while after being asked, then she gritted her teeth.

"No," she said, raising her head and looking straight into my eyes. She said it clearly.

I gave a big nod. "Okay. Then you only have one path forward. Face Karsha head-on and settle this. There's no other way for you to escape the curse. Fight. I'll help you."

"...With Mother..." She hesitated for a moment—but eventually, she gave a firm nod. "...Alright. I'll steel myself. But... why help me? Didn't you receive a request from Mother in the first place?"

"Hmm?" Come to think of it... taking her side here might be a slight breach of contract... I gave a small, wry smile. "I told you, didn't I? My sister back home put me through the same thing. In other words—this isn't someone else's problem for me. That's why I'm helping. That's all."

"...I see... Thank you." I firmly grasped the right hand she offered—and then.

"My, my. It seems you've reached a decision."

That leisurely voice chilled the spines of both Marlene and me.

I turned around. Slowly. Toward the direction of the voice.

There was only the greenery of the forest. There wasn't a person in sight, nor even a presence. But then, a bush moved.

No. The object I had thought was a bush, located not far from us, stood up and took a human shape.

—Karsha.

Wh... when did she get there?!

She wore a wry smile and slowly turned toward me. Was the chill running down my back from some kind of presence she radiated, or from the fear I felt?

"Honestly, Miss Lina. This isn't what we agreed on."

The smile she directed at me was deathly terrifying.

"D-d-d-d-don't get the wrong idea." I tried to sound composed, but I couldn't even speak properly. I desperately racked my brain. "Saying I broke our agreement or betrayed you is a total misunderstanding! Total! I... in the first place, what I agreed to was to help Karsha and Marlene have an opportunity to talk, right? Right?"

"Yes. That's right."

Gaining strength from her nod, I rattled on. "Well, a 'talk' requires input from both sides, but since Marlene left home on her own, there was a chance she might run away the moment she saw you, right?! In that case, it wouldn't be a talk at all, so I thought it might be better to hear her side of the story beforehand! In fact, hearing her talk just now, it seems she had a bit of a complex about you, Karsha!"

"Oh my." At my words, Karsha gave a small clap. "Now that you mention it, that's true. I'm sorry for making you worry, Miss Lina. Thank you. I'm impressed."

The pressure vanished instantly.

"No, no. I just did what was natural." I wiped the greasy sweat from my cheek while pretending to scratch my head in embarrassment.

Alright, I survived somehow. ...Wait, I'm already being completely overwhelmed by her!

Karsha turned her smile toward Marlene. "—Now then. Marlene."

"Y-yes, Mother!"

"Let's begin. Our talk." Karsha casually took up a stance with her sword—

"—Wait a minute!" Now that the pressure was gone, I jumped in with a retort immediately.

"What is it, Miss Lina?"

"Don't 'what is it' me! Why on earth are you taking a sword stance right at the start of a 'talk'?!"

"...Ah!" At my point, Karsha took a small breath. "...You're... you're right... jumping straight into a duel with my best weapon was the wrong way to go..."

"Exactly!"

Hearing my words, Karsha bowed to Marlene. "I'm sorry, Marlene. I finally understand now. What I was doing wrong... ...Then, choose whichever weapon you like. We'll settle this with that."

"That's also wrong! Talk with words before picking up weapons!" I retorted again immediately.

Karsha turned a somewhat bewildered look toward me. "...Eh...? But they say 'no words are needed for communication between parent and child'..."

"That doesn't mean 'solve it with force'! It's more like... being in the same place and understanding what each other wants to say just by exchanging glances, even in silence."

"Yes. That's why we, being on the same battlefield and remaining silent, just by exchanging blades..."

"Don't exchange them! In the first place, Marlene ran away because she rebelled against that kind of educational policy, so you're having a 'talk,' right?!"

"...Then... would you prefer to talk with words first? Marlene?"

"I would prefer that, Mother." Marlene answered Karsha's somewhat dissatisfied question without hesitation.

"...I suppose it can't be helped..." Karsha said with a sigh—

"I don't know what you're troubled about—" At that moment, a man's angry voice cut in. "But there's no need to think anymore."

I turned around to see a middle-aged man dressed like a gentleman standing outside the brush. But the countless swordsmen standing behind him told me he was no mere passing gentleman.

And this man—above all, he had no openings.

"...Mr. Nelrone!" Marlene's voice echoed in the forest.

Then this man was—

"Are you Marlene's relatives?" the man said in a slimy voice. "Nice to meet you. I am Clamad Nelrone. The one who leads this family—"

(Runaway Girl: To be continued)

Karsha, Marlene, Nelrone. Many intersecting feelings. One after another, the organization's strongest assassins attack! In the midst of the unfolding battle, will the bond between parent and child be reforged? Can Marlene overcome Karsha? And what will Lina find within all this?

Next time: "Runaway Girl" (Conclusion)

Wait while having a talk with your mother!

Runaway Girl [Part 2]

Lina Inverse received a request from a kind-looking woman, Karsha, to bring back her runaway daughter. However, the place Marlene ran away to was the neighboring region's largest criminal organization, the Nelrone Family. Furthermore, Lina learns that Karsha was also a terrifying person once known as the Hyena of Raltigue.

While the organization's hideout is being helplessly destroyed, Karsha and Marlene are reunited. As the parent-child conversation progresses, Clamad Nelrone, the organization's boss whose hideout was crushed, now stands before the three of them with his confidants!

"But Marlene, I think having someone close to you as a goal helps you grow more," Karsha said, resting a cheek on one hand and tilting her head. "Look. I think Miss Lina was able to use such a magnificent technique precisely because she had a goal like her older sister."

She pointed to a massive crater—the mark of the Dragon Slave I had released. Some inconsiderate people had barged in while we were having a complicated conversation, so I blew them away a bit. ...Come to think of it, I think one of them said he was the organization's boss or something... anyway, now that everyone's been blown away, that's all in the past.

The three of us sat in the grass near the crater and talked. Seeing the relationship between Karsha and Marlene and overlapping it with my own sister, I had told Marlene I'd help her on impulse... but once I was actually in front of Karsha, my soul was screaming, "Forget it, just leave already." Don't call me a coward. Living things have this thing called survival instinct.

And so, while keeping a sharp eye out for a chance to leave, I went along with their conversation for the time being. Although "conversation" at this point was mostly Karsha lecturing Marlene.

"Everything I made you do was for your own sake. Surely the day will come for you too, when you're kidnapped by a mysterious secret society and have to escape on your own, or you accidentally learn of the existence of a national secret organization and are targeted—that day will come. You have to train daily so you won't panic if that happens."

"No... I don't think a day like that will come, Mother."

"What are you saying? When I was your age, I destroyed a mysterious organization that had kidnapped and raised me since I was little and escaped, and I survived by eating the meat of a brown bear I killed with my bare hands."

"S-such a past existed, Mother?! It's the first I've heard of it!"

Marlene recoiled, but Karsha even wore a smile. "Yes. It's a common occurrence, so I never brought it up. Anyway, though it varies from person to person, such things always happen. I think that's what people call 'the stairs to adulthood.' You had a period like that too, didn't you, Miss Lina?"

"N-no, well, in the region where I lived, that kind of custom wasn't very common..."

"Oh, really?"

"I-I'm sure that's not in fashion these days, Mother. ...In fact, I don't want a day like that to come, from the bottom of my heart."

"Oh, it doesn't happen lately? ...I suppose it's a difference of the times. I wonder if things like that are disappearing... good old cultures."

Is that a "good culture"?

"Oh, then how about this?" If I let her continue, Karsha's terrifying memories would go on forever. I cut her off and spoke. "Karsha is worried about Marlene. Meanwhile, Marlene feels she's fine on her own, so she wants you to not fuss over her so much. At this rate, you'll be on parallel lines forever. Even if you force Marlene home now, she'll probably just run away again, and then Karsha will come to bring her back again. If so, there's only one way for both sides to be satisfied. You should test whether Marlene is fully fledged or not."

"A test?!" The voices of mother and daughter harmonized perfectly.

"Exactly. Basically, we just need to make it clear if Marlene is fully fledged or not, right? However, since times are different from Karsha's day, I think you'll need to talk until you both agree on the method."

"I see."

"I can accept that."

Once the two of them nodded—"Well then—" I muttered and stood up. "Then my role ends here. You two talk it over thoroughly. I'll be heading off now."

"What?!" Marlene cried out in surprise at my declaration. "W-wait a minute! Earlier you said... you'd help..."

"I did help. I made it so you could have a fair negotiation as parent and child. Otherwise, it would have suddenly become a 'settle it with swords' situation. By any chance, would you have preferred that?"

"...No... of course that would be a problem..."

"Right? Well, from here on, it's your own problem." Hiding my true feelings—that I didn't want to be involved with Karsha anymore—I rattled off my justifications.

"Truly... it's just as Miss Lina says." Karsha walked toward me with her usual terrifyingly made-up smiling face, took a small leather bag from her bosom, and said, "Thank you. For reuniting me with my daughter. It's small, but here is the promised reward."

The leather bag I received had a decent weight to it.

And so, one request was successfully completed. And they lived happily ever after.

A vegetable salad with crisp lettuce. Onion soup simmered thoroughly. Pork ribs with plenty of spices. Dish after dish was brought out. After finishing the request and returning to town, I was eating to my heart's content at an eatery I'd had my eye on. This was truly a moment of supreme bliss. Oh life, thank you. I reached with my spoon toward the sweet potato cream stew that had just been served—

"Look out!"

CRASH!

At that exact moment, I was suddenly tackled from the side and tumbled over, chair and all.

"...Wh...?" I managed to pick myself up—and then I froze in shock. Perhaps from the impact of the fall, my precious dishes that had been lined up on the table were all overturned.

"...D-d... DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!?" I screamed, clutching my head, but it was too late. The cream stew mixed with onion soup wasn't coming back. Never again.

...You! I won't forgive this! I glared at the person who had crashed into me—"Hey, you! ...Wait... Marlene? Why?"

The anger I was about to vent vanished, and I squinted my brows in spite of myself. Yes, the idiot who had suddenly tackled me was Marlene, whom I should have parted with earlier today.

"Just in the nick of time. That was close."

"Close? What was?"

At my question, she silently pointed—at the wall of the shop. On the well-maintained but aged wooden wall, a needle about the length of a palm was sticking out. Exactly—yes, at about the height of my head when I was sitting.

"...Eh...?"

"Don't let your guard down, though." She spoke to me with a serious face while I stared blankly.

"Eh? Eh?"

"Mother should still be nearby."

"EEEEEEEEEEEEK?!" I cried out. Other customers directed curious looks our way, but I didn't have time to worry about that now. "W-wait a minute! Why would Karsha... I mean... that needle just now...!"

"I was lucky earlier today," Marlene said, keeping her gaze and attention on our surroundings. "I talked with Mother after that. Miss Lina, it was decided that if I can protect you for three days, Mother will acknowledge me as fully fledged."

.....Wh.....

"Wait a minuteeeeeeee! So what does that mean?! Is Karsha targeting my life right now?!"

"There's no need to worry. The objective is strictly my test. Mother doesn't particularly hold any murderous intent toward you."

At her words, I pointed sharply at the needle stuck in the wall. "Whether she has murderous intent or not, I'll die if something like that sticks in my head! Besides, if it's fired without any bloodlust, I won't even be able to sense it! And more fundamentally, don't decide things like that without asking me!"

"Well, I thought you'd definitely refuse if I told you, so I had no choice."

"It's not 'no choice'! Of course I'd refuse! Cancel it! Cancel it right now!"

"Even if you say that, it's a problem. I have no way to contact Mother from here."

"Don't say that so casually! You might be fine with whatever, but what about my safety?!"

"Hmm..." Marlene thought for a while. "But they say, 'work hard while you're young even if you have to pay for the privilege'."

"They say that, but they also say 'no solicitors'!"

She thought again. "Then... as aftercare, how about we compromise by having me ask for the address of your family home now..."

"I don't want such pessimistic aftercare from the bottom of my heart! In the first place, since it's your test, why didn't you just become the target yourself?!"

"Certainly, Mother suggested that too... but in that case, there's a high possibility that I wouldn't be able to demonstrate my true strength due to various emotions. Therefore, guarding a third party is more desirable. For example, Miss Lina—and that opinion of mine was adopted."

"It's your fault?!" I grabbed her with teary eyes, but she remained composed.

"Calm down. It's only three days of endurance. Getting into a dispute with me here won't solve anything. It should be a better strategy for us to cooperate."

"...Well... that's true, but..." Honestly, I felt like saying "Look who's talking."

Anyway, I ended up in a situation where I had no choice but to cooperate with Marlene. —I'm definitely going to kill this girl after three days—I thought secretly to myself.

"You look tired, Miss Lina."

"...Of course I am..." I murmured weakly as we walked along the town street the next morning in response to Marlene's voice. "After all, I didn't get any sleep at all last night~"

She looked straight back into my half-lidded eyes. "Is something troubling you?"

"It's your fault! Yours! Thinking about when Karsha might launch a night attack, I couldn't sleep a wink!"

"I don't think you need to be so nervous. I'm protecting you, and even if I were to fail, if you're asleep, you won't have to suffer."

"That's not okay at all!" My voice, which I'd raised reflexively, vanished into the town's bustle.

Aaaaah. Even though the town is so peaceful, why am I going through this? Various people coming and going. Children running around excitedly. Stalls lining both sides of the road with all sorts of goods. Accessories, meat, oranges, vegetables, clothes, decorations—

—At that moment, something caught my attention.

.....Oranges?

The moment I noticed, I was already dashing. *Fwoosh!* The sound of the wind tearing right behind my back. I passed by and turned around to see several spears sticking out from the orange stall. If I'd been walking, they would undoubtedly have pierced the empty space where I should have been. The screams of the passersby echoed a beat later.

"L-Lina!" Marlene cried out in surprise, dodging those spears and running toward me. "Are you alright?!"

"I guess. I just suddenly remembered how Karsha was selling oranges at a stall earlier... and also, there was no one at the shop." I pointed toward the back of the stall where—no, since the moment we passed by, there had been no one there.

If the owner were just missing, I wouldn't have cared. It's a common sight at stalls to ask the neighbor to watch the shop while you step away for a bit. But in addition to that, the fact that they were selling oranges was what caught me.

"...But I'm glad... truly..." Marlene wiped the greasy sweat from her forehead. "For a moment, I thought I'd have to undergo Mother's special training after all..."

"Worry about me! Me! But a sudden spear trap—is Karsha seriously trying to kill me?!"

"No... Mother seemed to think quite highly of you, Miss Lina. She probably thinks, 'Miss Lina surely wouldn't be discouraged just because a few spears stuck in her'."

"I'd be deathly discouraged! Or rather, I'd be discouraged and then die!"

"Nonsense! For someone like you, that's not like you at all."

"What on earth do you think I am?"

"...Anyway. It's not a good strategy to have a long talk in a place like this." She looked around. "There's a possibility Mother is still nearby, blending into this crowd. Let's leave this place as quickly as possible."

"...Right..." On that point at least, I had absolutely no disagreement. Leaving the still-buzzing passersby behind, the two of us left the area—

"...At this rate, it's just too dangerous..." I said to Marlene while we were having lunch at a small eatery in a corner of town.

—Usually, I'd keep traveling from town to village as I felt like it—but in this situation where Karsha is targeting me, I don't have the guts to travel along deserted roads, which would be like asking her to attack me.

I'd decided to live quietly and inconspicuously in this town until the test period ended. Don't call me pessimistic. The opponent is someone who'll throw a needle at your carotid artery without a shred of malice. You can't be too careful.

"Dangerous?" Marlene asked back while eating potato salad. I gave a firm nod.

"Take this morning's attack, for example—fortunately I noticed, so we managed... but neither you nor I sensed Karsha's bloodlust or presence. It was just sheer luck. So if Karsha gets serious from now on—honestly, it'll be difficult to keep escaping. In that case, I'll be unhappy, and you'll go back to days of training under Karsha. Is that fun?"

She shook her head vigorously in silence.

"The deadline for the test is three days—which means it will be over the evening of

the day after tomorrow. I need to think of a strategy to manage until then."

"A strategy? What kind?"

As she leaned forward to ask, I let out a long sigh.

"...Seriously... Since this is supposed to be your test in the first place, don't you think you should come up with some kind of plan yourself?"

"...A plan..."

Marlene thought for a moment, then suddenly lifted her head, exclaiming, "That's it...! Protecting Lina-san from Mother means that as long as I create a situation where Mother cannot lay a hand on you, there won't be a problem!"

"Oh. That's not bad. So? What's the concrete method?"

"Before Mother can make a move, I will—with these hands—take care of Lina-san..."

"Rejected, you idiot!"

"Eh!? Why!?"

"Because I'll die! That's why!"

"That may be so... but it's selfish of you to only insist on your own side of things..."

"Because that would be putting the cart before the horse! If you did something like that, Kasha-san would definitely just say, 'Since it didn't end up being a test, we'll have a re-test'!"

"I see... I was on the right track, though..."

"You weren't! Not at all!"

...It was no use. Getting her to think was a waste of time. I jabbed the fork I was holding into the air and said, "Listen, Marlene. In cases like this, there are only two options. Either you defend yourself with everything you've got, or you go on the offensive. You choose based on the situation. Now, analyzing our current situation, the guard period is three days—that is, until the evening of the day after tomorrow. Since this is strictly a test, Kasha-san has no intention of touching anyone other than us. Which means—"

"I see—!" Marlene lifted her head at my words and said, "A siege!"

Our defenses were supposed to be flawless. We rented rooms at the largest and grandest inn in town—or, to put it another way, an inn with sturdy construction—and decided to hole up there. We took a total of five rooms: the one we stayed in, the ones above and below it, and the rooms on both sides. Incidentally, I made Marlene pay the bill, of course. We stocked up on water and food. With that, all we had to do was cut off contact with the outside world and wait for the deadline to pass.

"...But... is this really going to be okay?"

That evening, in the room illuminated by the magic light I had conjured, Marlene muttered this anxiously while nibbling on our siege dinner, which consisted only of bread, salty ham, fruit, and water.

"It's not 'flawless'—but this is likely the best course of action we can take. Since it's ultimately a test, Kasha-san won't go so far as to burn down the inn or blow away an entire wall with a spell. She might carve a hole in the wall to break in, but... since we've secured the rooms above, below, and on both sides, the entry routes are limited."

"In other words—the hallway side or the window side."

I nodded at the murmuring Marlene.

"And the opposite side will be our escape route. Oh, and just to be clear, don't you dare leave me behind and escape alone if something happens. That would defeat the purpose of being a guard."

"True. I shall endeavor to do so."

"Don't 'endeavor,' just make sure you do it. ...Geez..."

After finishing my light meal, I yawned involuntarily. I moved away from the table toward the bed and said, "Alright, I'm going to catch some sleep, so keep watch for me tonight, okay?"

"You are going to sleep already?"

"I couldn't sleep last night."

I took off my sword, shoulder guards, and cape and hung them on a hanger. As I reached for my bandana and sat on the bed—

—!?

There was a subtle discomfort in the mattress. The moment I felt it, I leaped off the bed—

Rip!

A black blade pierced through the mattress and tore through the exact spot where I had been sitting, at that very moment.

"What!?"

Before my eyes and those of Marlene, who was readying her sword, the kicked-up mattress split in two and danced in the air. Emerging from the other side was a single, pitch-black shadow.

Calling her "pitch-black" was no exaggeration. She was wrapped from head to toe

in black clothing, and not only was the blade in her hand blackened, but her face had been painted over with charcoal as well. There was no need to ask who she was, but—

"...Ho... how did you get in from a place like that!"

As I shouted, the black shadow—Kasha-san—twisted her white eyes (the only part not blackened) into a smile and replied, "Well, I realized when I failed to finish you off this morning that you're quite used to these kinds of situations, aren't you?"

She spoke in the tone of a good-natured middle-aged woman, despite her terrifying appearance. ...I mean, did she just say "failed to finish me off"? She really said that. Could it be that she had forgotten that the whole point was a test...?

She remained poised and continued.

"So, I thought Lina-san might try a siege strategy in a sturdily built inn. When I checked, this was the only room where the spaces above, below, and on both sides were vacant. So, I snuck in earlier and have been waiting here since noon. It was quite a gamble, though."

Kasha-san, having hollowed out the mattress and waited patiently since noon for her prey to appear. Just imagining it sent a chill down my spine. It was hopeless; I couldn't beat someone like this.

"Marlene! Time to stall as planned!"

I shouted this and, without waiting for an answer, bolted out of the room into the hallway.

—It was dark. The sun had already set, and the sky visible through the small windows lining the hallway was the indigo of night. Either the inn staff was slacking off or the sconces on the walls had yet to be lit, so the hallway stretched deep into the darkness. But there was no time to hesitate. After all, behind me was a woman far more terrifying than the darkness.

I sprinted through the hallway and skipped several steps on the stairs. I couldn't tell if the sound echoing behind me was the reverberation of my own footsteps or the footsteps of my pursuer.

I reached the first floor of the inn. The tavern and dining area were occupied by lounging guests. But that didn't bring me any comfort. I glanced back at the darkness behind me—

I felt as if the darkness had moved.

The moment I sensed that, I darted through the establishment and leaped out the front entrance onto the main street. Though the sun had only recently set and there were a few passersby, the town in the evening twilight, with its sparse streetlights, was dark. I ran down the street, chanting a spell under my breath.

Glancing over my shoulder, I looked back—

Something moved.

This time, it definitely wasn't my imagination. It was there. Something of the same color as the darkness.

Without a sign, without a sound. But I clearly sensed it closing in on me—

"Wind Thrust!"

I cast the high-speed flight spell I had finally completed and flew through the night.

It was quite some time later, after having pushed myself hard, that I finally dispelled the spell and caught my breath. I had probably reached the outskirts of the town. All I saw around me were unfamiliar buildings and alleys. Faint light and noise leaked from the back of the houses, but there were no people on the street. Come to think of it... I had left my luggage at the inn, but that room was rented for three days on Marlene’s tab. I could go back to retrieve it after the test period ended.

"...Well then... The question is, what now..."

I stopped my muttering and froze. The darkness had increased its weight.

It was here. Something. Nearby.

That shouldn't be possible. It was impossible. I had flown here at high speed using a flight spell. There was no way anyone could follow me on foot. It shouldn't be possible, but—

I had a premonition. An endlessly ominous premonition. Whether or not you trust that can sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

Right now. I was going to trust my premonition.

She was here. Nearby. Kasha-san.

"…Oh my… I wonder if she’ll make it in time."

At that moment. I whirled around, startled by a voice that reached me from afar. At the end of the stretching alleyway, there was only darkness. Nothing moved.

No—or was something assimilated into the darkness approaching?

My movement stopped for an instant—and then I felt the wind. From above.

—Not in time—

That was the only thought that flashed through my mind in that split second.

But.

Clang!

What rang out nearby was not the sound of steel gouging flesh, but the sound of steel shattering steel. And right next to me, two presences existed.

I sank to my knees, onto the cold earth. And then I finally realized I had been holding my breath. I exhaled into the night air and looked up. Two figures were there.

One was, of course, Kasha-san, dressed entirely in black. However—the black blade she held had been snapped in half.

Facing her—was a face I didn't recognize at all. A plain, middle-aged man around forty. His stubble was visible even in the night. He wore very ordinary, cheap clothes. The only difference was the thick dagger he held in one hand. It had likely prevented Kasha-san's attack—which she had unleashed while leaping down from the building—from hitting me at the very last moment, shattering her sword.

Blinking her eyes, Kasha-san said to the man, "Oh. Father. Are you back?"

"...Father... you say...? Is this person...?"

To my utterance Kasha-san, who looked embarrassed said, "Yes, Lina-san. He is my husband. He was away on a business trip... but you were quite quick to return, weren't you?"

When asked, the middle-aged man sheathed his dagger and replied in a friendly tone, "Aye. The guerrillas didn't amount to much, so."

Who are you? I'm grateful you stopped Kasha-san, though.

"But when I returned, you weren't there, and when I finally found you after searching, you were targeting this person. ...I stopped you on impulse, but who is this?"

"Yes. Marlene ran away from home again. I asked for your help in bringing her back, and you said, 'Test her to see if Marlene is a full-fledged adult.' And right now, you are helping with that guard duty test."

"I never said I would 'cooperate with the test'!"

This was my only chance. I squeezed out the words.

"Oh my. Is that so?"

At that declaration, Kasha-san's eyes went wide. "That child said, 'Lina-san will surely cooperate. I will convince her myself. If it doesn't work, I'll say it doesn't work,' and after that, she didn't say anything else, so I assumed you had accepted..."

"Hmm. Marlene is as careless as ever," the middle-aged man said with a bitter smile.

Don't dismiss it as her being "careless." And wait, was it all that girl's fault!?

No—perhaps she wasn't being careless, but had kept silent on purpose to drag me into it. I had a feeling that was exactly it. Deeply.

Alright. If that's how it's going to be.

I managed to stand up and, pretending to think, crossed my arms. "...Hmm... It's not my place to say, but to forget something so important during an important test... doesn't that suggest there are various problems regarding her becoming independent?"

"You're right..." Kasha-san sheathed her sword, touched her cheek, and muttered—

She and the middle-aged man simultaneously looked toward the back of the street. I was drawn to look as well, and there stood—

"...Fa... Father? Why are you here?"

Marlene finally reached the scene, standing there without understanding the situation. Facing her, Kasha-san said in a troubled tone, "More importantly, dear, it seems Lina-san didn't say she would accept being your test opponent."

".....No, that's..."

Kasha-san walked straight up to Marlene, took her by one arm, and said, "If that's the case, Mother still cannot acknowledge you as a full-fledged adult. The test is canceled. We are going home to train you properly."

"Eeeehhh! Wait...!?"

When she turned her eyes toward her father for salvation, the man said, "Hahahaha. That won't do, Marlene. You must communicate clearly while executing a strategy. That's right. Until now, I've left your education to your mother, but from now on, I will help too. I'll tell you this much: I am not as lenient as your mother. Hahahaha."

He also walked up to Marlene and took her other free arm. Now, Marlene couldn't move in any sense of the word.

Kasha-san bowed to me. "Well then, Lina-san, please excuse us. I am truly sorry for causing you so much trouble."

And the couple began to walk away, with the reluctant Marlene sandwiched between them. Carried on the night breeze, the family's conversation drifted to me.

"But you have to work much harder from now on, Marlene. Mother has spoiled you a bit too much, so from now on, I'm going to be strict, along with your father."

"Hahaha. Listen, Marlene. When I was your age, I launched a night raid alone on an entire infantry company and slit the throats of all the squad leaders. People often teased me, calling me the 'New Moon Ghoul'."

Oh, the beautiful affection between parent and child.

As she was taken into the depths of the darkness with her sides held firmly by the two "great monsters," all I could do when Marlene sent a pleading look toward me was to speak to her in my heart.

—Please, whatever happens next, do not drag me into it again—

I thought. ...It seems it will be a long time before I surpass my sister back home…

(Runaway girl part 2:end)

Mission Possible [Part 1]

The voice came suddenly, from right beside me.

"I’m being followed."

"...Huh?"

I looked up from my half-eaten baby shrimp sandwich to see a woman’s face, tight with urgency, right in front of me. She looked to be in her early twenties, with straight blonde hair, well-defined features, and very plain beige clothing. She looked just like an ordinary townsperson.

I was in the Kingdom of Rihard, a small nation tucked away in a corner of the coastal countries. I happened to be in its castle town. While it was technically the capital, it was by no means a major metropolis. I had just stopped by on a whim, bought a sandwich at a street stall for a snack, and sat down by a fountain in a small park. That was exactly when it happened.

"...Followed... you say?"

"Yes!" she said, her voice low but clear.

I see. So, she was being tailed by some creepy guy, saw me in my mage’s robes, and decided to ask for help. I could have turned her down because it sounded like a hassle, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to teach some idiot a lesson and—oops, I mean—inflict a bit of economic sanctions on him by snatching his wallet.

"Got it."

I shoved the rest of my sandwich into my mouth in one go and stood up.

"Follow me."

I walked off briskly, and she followed a step behind. Behind me, I could definitely sense the presence of stalkers. Not just one—two, maybe even more.

If that were the case, the opponents weren't just some masher, but a bunch of thugs or something similar. I crossed the main street and ducked into a narrow alleyway.

"...Um... won't it be worse for us if we go into a place like this...?"

"It'll be fine."

I brushed off her anxious question and kept walking. The presence behind us closed the distance. They were probably planning to make their move here, not realizing

they were being lured.

"Th-they're coming! They're right behind us! See! You can hear their footsteps, right? Aah, I can hear them, I can hear them!"

The woman blurted out in a low voice, oozing with terror.

But it was still too early to strike. I needed to draw the stalkers in a little further—

"What are you going to do!? That's why I told you going into an alley like this was a bad idea!"

...You're noisy.

As I turned around, I grabbed the woman by the scruff of her neck and used her momentum to switch places with her. Right behind her were two thugs who had closed in on us.

The men froze for a split second when they were exposed to my gaze—

And I aimed right for that moment.

"Magic Wind!"

Whoosh!

I unleashed the high-wind spell I had been chanting.

There was no room to run in a place like this. The hurricane blew the men away, slamming them into the wall and the ground. Their screams were drowned out, and the men were knocked unconscious without a chance to resist.

Hmph. Too easy.

Having thus relieved the fallen goons of their wallets, I left the scene with her in tow.

"That was amazing!"

After we cleared the alley and stepped out onto a wide street, she turned to me and said that with a playful voice.

"It only took one hit, one hit! I thought that outfit was just a costume, but you really can use magic, Melody-san!"

....?

"...Melody...? Who's that?"

"Eh."

She stiffened for a moment when I asked, but soon after, she flashed a smile again and scratched her head.

"Ah. Right. Of course. You're amazing, Melody-san. I'm Miriella Ingram."

"...Um, look... I didn't mean for you to introduce yourself..."

"Ah. That's true too, isn't it. ...Uh, please wait a moment."

She rummaged through her clothes, pulled out a piece of parchment, and stared at it.

"…Err… We don't see any pigeons today, do we?"

"Pigeons?"

I muttered, squinting my brows.

Silence.

A brief silence fell over the spot—

"No, um, that's not it, Melody-san! When I said that, you're supposed to say, 'If you mean pigeons, I saw them on the other street, they were fighting over food'!"

"...Look... I've been listening to you ramble on about nonsense for a while now... but why do I have to be watching pigeons? And you keep calling me Melody-san... My name is Lina. Lina Inverse."

"Eh."

She—Miriella—stiffened again, then looked back and forth between the parchment in her hand and my face.

"B-but, you were eating a shrimp sandwich by the fountain!"

"I was."

"…Then… eh? But, wait? …Aah!?"

She let out a loud shout as she stared at the parchment.

"I got the day wrong!"

"...Look... I don't know what's wrong, but... I don't care, who exactly are you...?"

I muttered, sighing at her as she panicked on her own.

"First you say you're being followed, then you call me by a name I don't know, then you start spouting off code-like language..."

...

I stopped mid-sentence.

I froze on the spot as well.

Code-like?

If that wasn't just "like" code, but actual...

A terrifying thought crossed my mind. Could this girl, by any chance...

"Found you. Dogs of Serenius."

The line that confirmed my ominous prediction came from the side at that very moment.

The Kingdom of Serenius.

It was the neighbor to this Kingdom of Rihard, and if my memory served me right, the two countries were *very* on bad terms.

Question: State what you infer from all this.

Answer: A bumbling spy from Serenius who infiltrated this country mistook me for a comrade and tried to strike up a conversation.

...I have a feeling I've ended up in a really nasty situation... I just hope this is all just my overthinking...

That said, this wasn't the time to grill Miriella.

Men were lined up on the street. Six of them.

They looked like ordinary townspeople. Their ages and builds were all different, but there was one thing they had in common.

The light in their eyes.

The number wasn't that high, but—there was no mistake. They were professionals.

The two from earlier were probably decoys. They were likely just thugs or something, hired with money and told nothing of the circumstances.

They were, so to speak, sacrificial stones meant to hide the existence of the men who had mastered the art of killing their presence by drawing our attention with their obvious, thug-like behavior.

The one who had spoken to us was a small man in a green vest. He looked pathetic, but I could tell by his atmosphere. He was likely the leader.

I tried to look flustered, perhaps a bit too dramatically.

"...Wait...! Wait a second! 'Dogs,' you say... I have nothing to do with this! I don't know who you are, I don't know who you're after, and I don't know who this woman is! She just misunderstood something on her own and dragged me into it!"

I pointed at Miriella and explained to the man.

But she narrowed her eyes and yelled, "Aah!? Why are you acting like you're the only one who has nothing to do with this now!?"

"It's not 'acting like it,' I *have* nothing to do with this! Period!"

"...Hoh... So you insist you have nothing to do with it?"

The small man said in a sticky, unpleasant tone, keeping his glare fixed on me.

"Then, I suppose you can prove your identity?"

"Prove... that's easy to say, but... as you can see, I'm a traveling mage... If you went to the Mage's Guild and inquired, it might become clear..."

"—Your name—?"

Asked by the man, I replied with a sigh, "Lina. Lina Inverse."

The moment I said it.

Muffled laughter filled the men.

"Lina Inverse. Hoh! So you are that Lina Inverse?"

The small man's tone was laced with mockery.

"...Probably that Lina Inverse."

"I see. You thought that by using the name of the famous, notorious mage Lina Inverse, we would be struck with fear and leave. But... your feeble-mindedness is laughable at this point."

"Hey, wait."

"I'll teach you, so listen well. Unfortunately, your appearance does not match Lina Inverse. According to our meticulous investigation, the real Lina Inverse has a massive physique, light blue skin, always hides the small horn on her forehead with her bangs, and only operates on moonless nights."

"Wait a second! What kind of 'meticulous investigation' did you guys do!? Or rather, is that even human!?"

"Of course it isn't," the small man said flatly.

...You jerks...

I had been plagued by dishonorable rumors for a long time—that I was a "bandit

killer" or that "even dragons step aside" when I pass by—but it was rare to be told such nonsense.

"Now then. Quietly..."

"You're loud! Fireball!"

BOOM!

My anger-fueled attack spell blew the men away the very next moment.

"Actually, Lina-san... there is something I have to tell you."

Miriella started this after we blew the men away and ran out of town together.

We were in a forest outside of town. All there was, was a mountain path that couldn't even be called a road. Naturally, there was no foot traffic, and there was no one else around besides us.

"Yes, yes. And?"

"Actually, I... that... I am a spy... dispatched from the neighboring Kingdom of Serenius!"

"I figured that much out already!"

"Ehhhhhh!? Why!?"

She was unnecessarily surprised at my instant retort.

"...I mean, in that situation, you'd have to be blind not to notice!"

"Heee... that's some amazing intuition... or rather, reasoning... That's right. Actually, I was ordered to contact a comrade whose face I didn't even know, and when I went there a day early, you were there eating the shrimp sandwich that was supposed to be the sign..."

She looked a bit annoyed. "It's your fault, Lina-san. You were doing something so confusing."

"Wait a second! It's my fault!? Wasn't it you who got the date wrong in the first place!?"

"...Because... the handwriting on the order sheet was so messy it was hard to read... Look."

She said this and thrust the parchment she had pulled from her clothes toward me.

It was indeed written in an incredibly illegible hand, noting the date, time, meeting place, the fact that the partner would have a shrimp sandwich, and the

password, but...

"Um... this paper says 'Top Secret: Destroy After Reading' in big letters at the top... Is that okay? Walking around with something like that, or showing it to people?"

"Eh?"

Miriella peered into my hand. "...Where is it?"

"I'm telling you, right here."

"...Aaaah! You're right! It was written so big, I just thought it was part of the design! You know, sometimes things like that happen, right?"

"No, not really."

"...Aaaah! That means!"

She snatched the parchment from my hand with a yell, glared at me, and said, "...You read it..."

"You're the one who made me read it!"

"Whatever the cause! The fact remains that you have come into contact with our classified information!"

I smiled broadly, grabbed Miriella by the scruff of her neck, and said, "Aha-ha-ha-ha. That's true. That's true. Putting the cause aside, it's also a fact that I was mistaken for your accomplice by those men earlier—the ones who were probably Rihard Kingdom agents—and that I blew them away, and that I read your classified orders. Now. Since we've finished confirming the facts, I think I'd like to investigate that 'cause' I put aside earlier, is that okay?"

"Th-th-there's no need to glare with such scary eyes...! O-okay, I get it! I admit it! I share some of the responsibility!"

"Share?"

"...D-don't tell me you're planning to say it's all my fault!?"

"It is all your fault, absolutely and without a doubt!"

"...Well... even if I concede a hundred steps..."

"I'm not even conceding one! Or rather, look me in the eye when you talk!"

She turned an resentful gaze toward me. "...But... even if I say 'You're right' here, I don't think reality is going to change."

"..."

Her point was well taken, and I involuntarily loosened my grip on her neck.

It was true—even if I turned Miriella over to those men and claimed I'd just been dragged into it, they would never believe me.

—Are you trying to escape even by selling out your comrade? Oh, so you're the real spy—

That's exactly what they'd say.

So, I only had one choice. Get out of this country immediately and stay away until the heat died down.

"...Well, I suppose... strangling you here won't solve anything."

"Exactly! And that brings us to the main point!"

She lowered her voice, her eyes brimming with determination.

"Now that we're in this mess, let's join forces and head to the Kingdom of Serenius together!"

"I'll pass."

She stiffened for a moment at my blunt reply.

".....Eh?"

She let out a foolish sound.

I gave a small shrug. "Because, I don't have any reason to go to Serenius. Besides, those guys are probably staking out all the roads between Rihard and Serenius, so it'd be easier to get out of this country by taking a completely different route."

"...W-wait a minute! What happens to me then!?"

I averted my eyes. "...I can't really say..."

"That's sooooo cruel! Does that mean my death is guaranteed!?"

"Not necessarily."

I patted her on the shoulder and gave her a sad smile. "There's no way they'd let you die that easily. You're a spy, after all."

"Noooooooooooo!"

She shook her head violently, clung to my arm, and pleaded, "Please, please come with me! With Lina-san's ability, you could deal with those guys even if they tried to meddle, right!? Right!? Right!?"

I scratched my head, saying, "...Well... if you really insist, I suppose I could go with you..."

"That's right! That's how it should be!"

She grabbed my hand—

"So, how much are you paying?"

She froze at my question.

"...Eh...? Um... how much... what do you mean...?"

"Exactly what I said. I'm safer if I escape to a country other than Serenius. Changing that to go with you is the same as taking a bodyguard request from you. So, naturally, you have to pay a fee."

"No... um... but... shouldn't that be, you know... out of the kindness of our friendship..."

I wanted to point out that there was no such thing, but a novice would do that in this situation. I smiled broadly and said, "That's right. So, in the name of our friendship, the fee will be double the market rate."

"Ehhhh!? My friendship is worth less than a stranger's!?"

"Well, yeah~♪ So, what's it going to be? Wander along all by yourself while assassins' fangs close in on you? Or pay my asking price and come to Serenius with me? Oh, and of course, you don't have enough cash for a huge sum like that on you, so just pay me all the money you have as an advance. You can pay the rest when we get to Serenius."

"...Uuuuuuuu... what a nasty choice..."

"It's not a choice. There's also the wonderful option of 'fleeing the country and being hunted for the rest of your life'..."

"...I'll pay... your asking price..."

Thus, while shedding tears of blood, she gladly accepted my proposal.

There were several routes from the Kingdom of Rihard to the Kingdom of Serenius.

One main road. Two small back roads.

Of course, there were other roads, too. One way was to cross into a third country first and then enter through another route. Another way was to go through pathless mountains and forests.

If I belonged to the organization doing the chasing—I would probably place forces

on all of them.

You might think it’s overkill for just Miriella, but I didn't know what kind of information she had.

If that information were, say, the King of Rihard's daily life or his security schedule, then I certainly couldn't let such information fall into the hands of the hostile Serenius.

I imagined that the fact she had been targeted by the Rihard agents might have had something to do with the information she was holding.

Of course, I hadn't asked about any of that, as I was afraid I’d be in over my head if I knew too much.

Anyway, that wasn't a problem for me at this point.

The problem was which route the Rihard agents were focusing their net on.

The net was probably thinnest on the route that involved exiting into another country first, but that would naturally be a huge detour, and if detected, I would be pursued for a long time.

In that case—Miriella and I were heading to Serenius using the biggest main road.

To the left of the road were mountains and green trees, but to the right, it opened up wide, and the afternoon sun was warm and pleasant.

...If it weren't for this situation, I would call it a comfortable journey...

"...Um... Lina-san..."

She asked in a soft, secret whisper while glancing around at the faces of travelers passing by. From the outside, she looked suspiciously suspicious.

"...There are really... a lot of people... why did you choose this road...?"

"Isn't it obvious? It’s more pleasant to walk on than a poorly maintained back road."

"."

She stiffened for a moment at my answer. I kept walking briskly, and she jogged to catch up to me.

"...No, um... aren't there reasons, like, 'to stay one step ahead of the enemy'...?"

"Nope."

When I answered flatly again, she stiffened again, jogged to catch up again—

" 'Nope'... that's...!"

"Isn't it obvious? If I knew the personality of the person planning the operation, I

could try to stay one step ahead, but if I don't, I can't read their hand. So, it comes down to luck, intuition, or personal preference. And my preference is 'walk down the main road with dignity.' That’s all there is to it."

"But won't we get found this way!?"

"No matter which road we take, we’ll get found. I’ll tell you this much now: be prepared for when it happens. If a fight breaks out and you panic and cling to me, I’ll beat you senseless and abandon you without question, so keep that in mind."

"Ehhhhhh!? No way! That's not what you promised!"

" 'Promised'... even if you say that, with that advance payment..."

I gave her a sidelong glance.

That line was in full-blown corrupt merchant mode, but the advance I’d received—that is, all of Miriella's money—was only six silver coins and two copper coins.

Since she expected me to fight off agents from a small nation for that amount, it was no wonder I felt like turning to the dark side. At this rate, I couldn't expect much for the remainder of the payment, either...

"Well, anyway. If you want to survive, you should try to fight or do something too. If you're doing this kind of work, you must have one or two things you’re good at, right?"

"Things I’m good at... um... when I was at home, everyone often praised me, saying, 'It’s funny to watch you when you’re observing from afar'..."

"That’s not a compliment! That!"

"...Or rather, why is someone like you doing spy work...?"

To my question, she said, her eyes shining unnecessarily brightly, "It's been a dream of mine for a long time. It sounds so cool, doesn't it? Ever since I heard it in a bard's song, I’ve just been completely in love with it. So when I was a kid, I often played spy games with everyone in the neighborhood, but they wouldn't let me play the spy role at all. For some reason, I was always the florist role who gets dragged into things and killed, and so I decided, 'When I grow up, I’m definitely going to become a real spy!' "

"...But how did you become a spy? That’s not a job you can just become because you want to, right?"

"Exactly!"

She nodded repeatedly. "The general's mansion was in the neighborhood, so I tried consulting him, but for some reason, he immediately declared, 'Stop it. Just stop,' and..."

...No, about that "for some reason"...

"Just because I'm a bit of a 'careless' person who’s notorious all over town... it’s prejudice, isn't it? Things like this."

"...No... I don't feel like that's a problem of prejudice... or rather, you were a 'careless person' on a level that was notorious all over town. But even so, how were you able to become a spy?"

"Yes. I was so sad, so I continued the steady job-hunting activity of consulting the general's dog about my life while crying from outside the gate for about a month, and then one day, the general said, 'I understand,' and..."

"Uwa... that’s... how should I put it... that must have been hard for you..."

"Yes. It really was."

...The "hard" I’m talking about refers to the general...

A woman who, as soon as she was refused a job, proceeds to continue consulting his dog about her life while crying. No matter how much of a battle-hardened soldier he might be, he probably couldn't handle that for long.

The fact that she was assigned as a dispatch to a hostile country rather than as administrative staff in her home country was likely an expression of the general's desire to keep her away as much as possible.

Anyway, I understood very well now.

That even if a battle broke out, this girl would be of no use whatsoever.

"—Hey, Miriella."

"Yes?"

"Don't panic, cling to me, or make a scene."

"Oh, come on. Are you talking about that again? I'm fine. When I was at home, I was often told, 'It’s an advantage that you look like you’ve got steady nerves.' "

"...Is that still an insult... Well, it’s fine. Anyway, I’m telling you, we’re surrounded."

"By what?"

She asked with a blank face, kept looking at my face, and continued walking for a while longer—

"—Ehhhhhhhhhh!?"

As I expected—no, a beat later than I expected—she let out a scream.

I didn't care and began chanting a spell.

"S-so that means we're surrounded by the Rihard people, is that what you mean!?"

I ignored her as she asked in a half-tearful voice and unleashed the spell I'd finished chanting—

"Fire Spear!"

Whoosh!

I unleashed it toward a passerby who had been nearby!

The single shot hit the ground, causing a small explosion, scattering into flames, and dissolving into the atmosphere.

Silence. And then—

Along with the screams, the figures of the passersby who sensed danger vanished from the area.

"...Wait...!? What are you doing, Lina-san, all of a sudden!?"

"Do I have to explain for you to understand?"

While scanning my gaze around the surroundings and probing for the atmosphere, I said:

The figure of the passerby I'd attacked had also vanished. He had easily dodged the spell I'd fired and disappeared into the depths of the roadside trees.

But their presence hadn't vanished. They were still lurking nearby, watching me.

Not one person. I couldn't be precise, but three, four, or more.

It went without saying. They were the Rihard agents. They had been following us, mixed in with ordinary travelers, for a long time.

I had felt their presence for a while, but it was thanks to Miriella's scream that I was able to pinpoint them.

Those who reacted to that voice and looked at her were irrelevant. However, among them, there were several who didn't look at her, but rather at another traveler.

That gaze was asking his companions, "How do we move?"

Sensing that *that* was the Rihard agent, I blasted an attack spell at one of them without question.

Of course, this also had the meaning of scaring away the unrelated people.

"...Why are you hiding?"

I shouted toward the ones who had hidden their figures.

"You came close intending to do something to us, right? So, there’s no point in hiding. Fortunately, the unrelated people are gone now, too. I don't think it would be a bad idea to settle this here, do you?"

I tried waiting for a while after saying that, but the opponent was still unresponsive.

...Are they wary of my attack spell and watching the situation... or is there some other intention...?

A brief, heavy silence followed.

The wind blew, the leaves rustled—

"...Um... Lina-san..."

Miriella, who had hidden behind me, asked timidly.

"...W-were they really... Rihard agents just now...?"

"Do you have any other leads on who might be targeting us?"

"I don't have anything like that."

"Then—there is no mistake."

"...But... couldn't they have gone somewhere else...?"

"They’re still here. I can feel them."

I said. I couldn't pinpoint the exact location, but deep within the trees on the mountainside, there were several presences quietly watching us. A stalemate ensued for a while—

...I started to get bored, and when I seriously began to consider just blowing up the entire mountain with a Dragon Slave or something, the sound carried on the wind—it came from the direction we had come from, the direction of Rihard. It was rapidly approaching.

—The sound of hooves—?

I see! The group hiding in the thicket was just buying time until the owners of those sounds—the mounted pursuit squad—could catch up!

The moment I thought that, the presences vanished.

"...Huh?"

I let out an involuntary, vacant sound. The presences that had been lurking nearby were completely gone. They had likely retreated somewhere. But—why? There

should have been no reason for them to leave. They could have cooperated with their companions arriving on horseback.

...What was going on?

"Ahhh! Lina-san, they've come, they've really come!"

At Miriella's cry, I looked behind us on the road—men on horseback were heading our way, kicking up clouds of dust. There were about five or six of them. They kept their distance and reined in their horses—

"...Finally caught up with you! You bitches!"

One of the men who raised his voice—the short man I had blown away in town earlier—was glaring at us with murderous intent in his eyes—

(Mission Possible: To be continued!)

The Rihard pursuers finally arrived!

Why did the men who had stopped the two of them leave, and where did they go!?

What information was Miriella holding!?

And would Lina and the others successfully reach Serenius safely!?

What would be their fate between two hostile nations!? Well, probably nothing special, I guess!

In any case, next time, the second half of "Mission Possible"!
Wait while dissolving your spy memo in water!

Mission Possible [Part 2]

In the castle town of the Kingdom of Rihard, a stranger named Miriella had mistakenly called out to Lina. That incident led Lina to be dragged into an espionage war between the Kingdom of Rihard and its neighboring, bitter rival, the Kingdom of Serenius. Miriella revealed her identity as a Serenius spy and asked Lina to accompany her to the border. A mysterious group surrounded the two as they traveled along the road.

And now. Driving their horses, the Rihard pursuers were closing in on Lina and Miriella!

I finally caught up with you, You bitches.

From the short man's perspective, that might have been meant as a cool closing line. But that trivial remark caused a fatal delay. Before the pursuers could take their next action, I shouted, "Fireball!"

Kaboom!

The attack spell I unleashed exploded right in front of them! It wasn't a direct hit. Just a scare. But that was enough.

Neighhhh!

A high-pitched whinny erupted. The horses they were riding panicked at the flame and the sound, turned on their heels, and bolted in whatever direction they pleased!

"Ah! Hey! Wait! You..."

Whether he was shouting at us or the horses, the short man's voice faded into the distance as he went back the way he came.

Hmph. Using ordinary horses they just happened to procure led to exactly this kind of situation. Horses were inherently timid creatures. Even if they were trained warhorses, if they weren't, one blast of an attack spell right in front of them would cause them to panic and flee immediately. Yes, just like it did now.

"All right. This should buy us some time."

"Wait, you just bought us time!? That doesn't solve anything at all! Why didn't you just finish them off!?"

"Why... you ask..."

I brushed off Miriella's accusing voice and began walking again.

"If I just chased them away, those guys would come back again. They might even bring reinforcements next time."

"—Then surely..."

"But if," I interrupted her, "as you said, I had absolutely annihilated them—without a doubt, even more skilled people would have come after us in even greater numbers. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"oh...! You're right... I certainly wouldn't want that..." she muttered, looking exhausted.

"More importantly... I'm worried about something..."

"...What is it?"

Turning to her as she started walking again, I held up a finger. "Look, before the men on horseback arrived, there were people marking us while pretending to be travelers, remember? Their movements are bothering me to no end."

"Maybe they just ran away because they were scared of being caught in the fight?"

"...I hope that's all it was..."

I gave an ambiguous response and turned my gaze to the sky. The sky leading to Serenius. The road, which wasn't even that far, felt unbearably long right now.

"By the way... Lina-san..."

That evening, Miriella had asked me in a hushed, secretive voice while glancing suspiciously at the faces of the other guests. We were having dinner at the dining hall of an inn in a small town along the road. The menu included corn soup, bacon salad, roast duck, white fish in cream sauce, garlic steak filet, and so on and so forth. Miriella only had cabbage and parsley.

I glared at her. "...What? Don't tell me you're complaining about the cabbage I treated you to? I'm being generous enough to share some parsley soaked in meat juices, cream, and garlic sauce from my own dish."

It might have sounded like the words of a demon, but I didn't want any misunderstandings. After all, the reason I got dragged into this mess in the first place was entirely her fault. She should be grateful I didn't just blow her away with an attack spell until she turned to ash.

Nevertheless, it was somewhat awkward to munch on my own favorite dishes in front of her when she was currently penniless. So, with the generosity and mercy of an angel, I decided to treat Miriella as well... to cabbage.

"...I won't complain about that comment, given you've already taken all my money and I'm currently at your mercy..."

For some reason, she was tearing up as she lowered her voice. "More importantly, why did you choose this inn? If we take our time like this, we'll be caught and captured. If we kept walking, I think we could have crossed the border before dawn..."

"Why, you ask? Isn't it obvious?" I took a sip of the flavorful corn soup. "To throw them off our trail. They wouldn't dream that we'd be taking our time eating dinner in a place like this. They're probably racing toward the border right now, thinking they've already overtaken us."

"I see!" Miriella clapped her hands. "It wasn't just because you wanted a delicious dinner or because you didn't want to sleep outside, was it?"

...*Gulp*... She was surprisingly sharp...

But I couldn't lose face by showing it. I kept my composure and said, "The border guards have likely already been notified by carrier pigeon or magic. The pursuers and the guards probably think we're aiming to cross the border in the middle of the night. So, we'll stay here, get a good night's sleep, wake up early, and break through the border in the morning when their concentration, energy, and physical strength are flagging."

"...But, couldn't we be found before then...?"

"No matter how we move, there's always a risk of being found. But this is still within Rihard. If a flashy battle breaks out, the town itself could get caught in the crossfire. So, they shouldn't be able to make a move easily."

"...Is that how it works...?"

"That's how it works." I asserted firmly to her anxious mutterings.

—Though, of course, the story would change depending on how much priority the pursuers placed on Miriella's arrest. If they were willing to cause damage to a town within their own country just to catch her, things might get a bit flashy. That likely depended on the importance of the information she was holding... Still, I didn't want to dig deeper and get trapped in that mess by asking her about it.

So—

"...Come to think of it, Miriella, how did your identity get leaked to those guys? Did you get discovered while investigating something... or what?"

"No. I have no idea why they realized my profession." She replied with a troubled face. "I received my orders and was supposed to contact my colleague, but..."

"Well, you did get the time off by a day and went to the wrong person, so there's that."

"...Anyway. When I left home and tried to go to the meeting place, men were following me from behind... So I assumed they had already realized who I was... well, they actually had realized..."

"Hmm..." I carried a piece of roast duck to my mouth and thought. Suddenly... huh... "Did you do some work related to that the day before, and then...?"

"No. I hadn't done any work like that for a while. Oh, but maybe, since that order paper arrived three days ago, maybe that's when they realized..."

"...Hmm..." I groaned and reached for the white fish—

Bang!

The door of the shop opened with a loud sound at that very moment. I looked up reflexively, and standing there was—

"—You bastards! To think you were in a place like this!"

The short man and the Rihard expert team I had chased off a little while ago!

"Whoa, we were found out so easily!"

"What are you going to do!?"

"Run, obviously!"

I stood up at the same time I said that, turned on my heels, and headed for the back door! Damn it! I hadn't even touched my food yet!

"Mmph, this is terrible! What are we going to do!?"

Miriella’s mouth was stuffed with the food I’d snatched in the confusion, and she was complaining. Ugh, annoying. I wanted to complain, but I was already chanting a spell. Either way, the two of us dashed through the kitchen and out the back door.

The back of the inn was a narrow path along the river. A little further away was a bridge. Across the river, fields spread out, and beyond that, the land connected to a forest at the foot of the mountain. The sun had already set, the moon was out, and the chirping of insects echoed along the riverbank.

I exited the back door and closed it—

"Ice Spear!"

Cling!

I froze the door and the wall with the cold spell I released. I started running along the river toward the bridge.

Damn it! The door!

What the hell are you doing!?

The roars of the men and the sound of them pounding on the door reached me from behind. If I could escape into the woods on the other side while buying time, I should be able to shake off the pursuers. But, to think my location would be discovered so easily—

"Lina-san!"

Miriella’s voice pierced the night air. I had already noticed it too and stopped my feet. From the shadow of a building toward the bridge, a single tall shadow stepped out.

"Are you in a hurry? Young ladies?"

The voice belonged to a young man. I couldn't tell the color in the night, but his long hair—blonde or silver, perhaps—fluttered in the night wind.

He wore elaborate, somewhat aristocratic clothing that felt out of place here. He couldn't be just a passerby. In that case—

"...We’re in a hurry."

"There is no need to be impatient. You are still young. —It is a nice place, this country. Why don't you stay a little longer?"

"Unfortunately, we have urgent business."

I said that, grabbed Miriella's hand, and began chanting a spell under my breath.

"Well, don't say that."

The man wasn't bracing himself, nor did he look like he was carrying any weapons. But—there were no openings.

Boom!

The sound of an explosion erupted behind us. They had likely smashed the door with an attack spell or something. Several sets of footsteps scattered. And then—

"Baron! You were here!"

The voice of the short man, who saw the tall man, rose behind me. I didn't know if "Baron" was his rank or just a mission name, but it was certain that he was also a pursuer. The man called Baron took one swaying step toward us—

At that moment, my spell was complete.

"Wind Thrust!"

Holding Miriella’s hand, I leaped sideways into the river! Just before hitting the water’s surface, the barrier of wind created by the spell I had woven enveloped

me, and I began to fly!

It was a high-speed flight spell. We crossed the river, aiming for the opposite bank.

"Gubabegabobubebegobab!"

Miriella, who was slightly outside the wind barrier and being dragged along, was making gargling noises just below the water's surface, but due to the nature of the spell, it was difficult to raise our altitude any further. Hang in there, Miriella, enough to stay alive!

I cheered her on in my heart while crossing the river toward the opposite bank—just as we were about to arrive.

Kaboom!

The ground in front of me exploded! Was it an attack spell!? If I hadn't been enveloped in the wind barrier, I wouldn't have come out of it unscathed. I felt like Miriella, who was partially outside of it, hadn't come out unscathed either, but that was that.

In any case, this was getting bad. If I tried to escape toward the forest, I would be a sitting duck in the open fields. Even if I was enveloped in the wind barrier, it wouldn't hold up if I took a powerful blow.

—No choice—

I forcefully made a U-turn. Once we got back into town, they probably wouldn't do anything too reckless... Probably.

I crossed the river surface again, darted into an alley, and headed back into town. I turned a corner—

Kaboom!

Another explosion. Right behind me.

—Wow. They're just casually doing reckless things!

Were they trying to capture us even if it meant causing damage to the town? Or—

I dispelled the spell and landed in a suitable spot. This spell was fast, but it wasn't very agile. It wasn't suitable for moving around alleys.

"...Li... Lina-sa..."

I dragged Miriella, who was completely exhausted, and moved the alley further, right and left.

Boom!

The sound of an explosion echoed from a little further away. As expected, this—

After turning several corners—Miriella and I stopped. A narrow alleyway sandwiched between residential walls. Barrels, wooden crates, and lumber were piled up haphazardly. A tall shadow stood in our path. It was the man called Baron, whom I had met on the riverside road just moments before.

"…It seems you prefer things flashy. But we would rather prefer peace and quiet."

—As I thought—I see—

"I'll stop you here. I will inflict enough damage on you two to ensure you don't die."

Simultaneously with Baron's words, my eyes caught a small black shadow.

"Miriella!"

I pushed her aside and leaped sideways. The sound of something cutting the wind reached my ears—

Gubaboboom!

The barrels and crates nearby exploded into pieces with a flashy sound! What was that!? What was that attack just now!? I mean, I think I would die! If I took a direct hit like that!

"This way!"

I took Miriella and headed for another path. There was a presence behind me. I grabbed her hand again and leaped sideways.

Clang!

When I looked at the hard sound that echoed, an iron ball about two sizes larger than a fist was embedded in the stone wall nearby. Was that the weapon the man was using? It slid completely out of the wall—and the next thing I heard wasn't the sound of it falling, but the sound of something cutting through the wind and flying toward us.

We dodged it. The sound of destruction echoed.

Damn it! I turned around and was about to release the spell I had been chanting toward Baron—but stopped. He wasn't there anymore. Then where did that attack just now come from—

I had no time to check, but I heard the sound of wind cutting. An iron ball embedded itself in the ground right where I had just dodged. I wasn't entirely sure what kind of attack it was, but for now, I just had to run!

I had no idea how or where we had run, but eventually, we popped out onto the road along the river. After going in circles, we were back where we had started. When I looked back toward the town, the rising flames were mixed with the bustling noise of the people.

"Something... something terrible is happening, Lina-san."

"It's just your imagination."

I said that and began to chant a spell.

"Just your imagination... that's quite the thing to say."

The voice that rose from a distance belonged to the short man. Standing a street's width away and glaring at us were the short man and several of his cohorts.

"This time for sure, you won't be able to escape..."

I didn't wait for him to finish his sentence. At the sound and presence of something cutting through the wind that was closing in on us again, I scooped up Miriella and leaped sideways down to the riverbank—

"Fireball!"

I released the spell I had chanted! A fireball that would scatter crimson flames when it hit something. If I used it when I was in top form, one strike would melt even iron. I aimed at a rock jutting out into the middle of the river.

Sssssssssss!

Flames burst out. Steam rose. It became a thick fog, covering the area and blocking our vision.

"—Damn it! A flashbang!?"

The short man's voice rose in impatience. But it was too late now. The two of us blended into the steam fog and somehow managed to escape the scene.

The mountain morning was still cold, even at this time of year. The thick fog that had been born coated everything, leaving it damp and soaked. The grass, the trees, the clothes I wore. Even the air itself was wet. Morning fog was a staple of the mountains in this season; for a while after the sun rose, the base of the mountains would be blanketed in white.

This was it. This was our chance to cross the border.

Last night, after that ambush, Miriella and I had left the town and headed straight for the border. I had arrived just a moment ago. The border was now right under our noses. ...In the end, we hadn't had a chance to rest, but that couldn't be helped now. Regardless, once we crossed that line, this commotion should finally come to an end.

"...So, what do we do, Lina-san?" Miriella asked, lowering her voice in the pale, white darkness. "Are we still going to go through the mountain and cross the border like this?"

"...Yeah..." I muttered, thinking.

The pursuers were surely gathering at the border as well. Probably Baron and that short guy, too. I didn't care about the short guy, but Baron was a bit of a troublesome opponent. Running in head-first carried too much risk.

Therefore—

I made up my mind and started chanting a spell under my breath.

...*Thump... Thump*...

Through the fog, the Rihard border guards exchanged glances at the approaching footsteps.

"—Hey. Go take a look."

That arrogant voice belonged to the short man. Apparently, he had already arrived here, just as I expected. Two soldiers responded to the order and began walking into the depths of the fog—

“Uwaaaaaah!?”

A scream went up before long. They had seen the stone puppet I had created. It was twice the size of an adult, and its strangely bloated arms must have made it look quite powerful.

"It's... it's a golem! It's heading right for us!"

"What!?"

The group buzzed at the soldier's report. To an average soldier, a golem that couldn't be affected by swords was a significant threat.

In the midst of that—

"Hah! What a pathetic trick!" The short man sneered. "Don't panic! It's an obvious diversion! Tell the watchers at the other posts! Don't gather together even if a disturbance occurs! Watch the skies, too! They might be planning to cross the border by flying with magic!"

He issued reasonable, calm instructions to the surrounding soldiers. The golem continued its steady pace toward the soldiers—no, toward the border.

Before long—

"There's a golem here, too!" a soldier's voice called from the depths of the distant fog.

The short man hesitated for a moment before giving the order: "Handle it as instructed! We’ll go as soon as we finish this one!" He braced himself against the first golem closing in—

"—Now then—"

A tall shadow stepped out. Where had he appeared from?

"Baron?" the short man shouted.

"You don't need to trouble yourself with this."

"If this is a diversion, that is. In any case—destroy that golem."

Simultaneously with his words, the wind whistled. Was that the unidentified attack from earlier!?

Clang!

An impact ran through my golem. Something like an iron ball embedded itself in its torso—

In the sunlight filtering through the fog, I finally saw the true form of that weapon clearly. There was a weapon called a bola; it consisted of weights attached to the ends of a rope, used to capture targets alive by throwing it. The weapon Baron had unleashed was a giant version of that, with huge iron balls at the ends of thick, three-pronged wire ropes. One of those weights struck the golem's torso directly—

Thud!

Then, a second iron ball embedded itself in the shoulder.

—Huh?

In front of my stunned eyes, the third weight struck the head, and the first, having left the torso, struck it again—

The three weights danced one after another, as if they were alive, raining down blows on my golem. Naturally, a normal bola wouldn't move like this. In that case—

—I see!

I finally realized the true nature of that weapon. It was shaped like a giant bola, but this thing itself was likely a type of iron golem moved by magic. There was no rule that a golem had to be humanoid. It could be animal-shaped, or any other shape, for that matter. He was manipulating the iron balls connected by iron wires as a golem. He was using the three wires and iron balls like the legs of an insect to move freely and carry out the command of destruction.

The lines Baron had said—about wanting to inflict damage that wouldn't kill us, or ordering the golem's destruction—weren't just posing or dramatic declarations; they were commands to *this* golem.

...Still, knowing that didn't help me do anything about it. My golem was being battered by the iron-ball golem and was slowly beginning to crumble.

Damn it! It's a bit far, but I have no choice!

I signaled the golem.

Ooooooooooon!

Responding to the signal, the golem began to groan madly and swing its arms. To an observer, it must have looked like the death throes of a monster. A giant arm was torn off and flew away, its legs were broken by a direct hit from an iron ball, and it finally collapsed to the ground. Baron's bola-golem, having fulfilled its command, finally stopped moving.

"Hah. How trivial." The short man puffed out his chest, acting as if *he* had been the one to do it. He looked toward the soldiers. "All right. We'll handle the other golem—"

"No. Before that—" The calm voice of Baron stopped the short man's movements. "Examine the remains of the golem's torso and both arms."

—Damn it! He saw through it!

I gritted my teeth inwardly. Yes. Miriella and I were currently hiding inside the left arm of the golem that had just been destroyed. I had created a total of three golems. The plan was as follows:

I made it look like a diversion, sending Golem Number One toward the border. This one had a hollowed-out giant left arm where Miriella and I were hiding. A little later, I sent Golem Number Two to a different part of the border. Naturally, it would be attacked, but it would defend with its torso and right arm and intentionally let itself be destroyed. Nobody would suspect anything if a single arm of a destroyed golem remained. While they were distracted by Golem Number One being defeated and their attention was on Golem Number Two, we would break through the border.

Of course, this operation would be over if they sensed our presence. I could hide my own aura, but asking Miriella to do the same was impossible. That was why I'd quickly put Miriella to sleep with a spell and had a third, centipede-shaped golem carry her. But given the situation, it would be difficult to cross the border with the slow-moving centipede golem.

.....

If so. I had no choice. It was a final, do-or-die measure. The arm of the golem we were currently hiding in had holes for looking outside so we wouldn't be noticed. In other words, sounds from inside and outside were clearly audible. I took a deep breath and shouted as loudly as I possibly could—

"Give us support! Or else I'm telling everyone everything!"

Silence. The air stiffened.

"The arm! It's in the left arm!" Baron's voice rang out. Footsteps rushed toward us. And then—

Kaboom-ka-boom!

A countless number of explosions. A barrage of attack spells flew from somewhere and exploded around us!

"Uwaaaaaah!?"

"What!?"

"Calm down! The enemy is—"

The voices of the guards, the short man, and Baron mingled together—and I released the spell I had been chanting.

The morning fog still hadn't cleared, blanketing the area. I poked my head out in the mountains near the border.

—This was already Serenius territory.

Yes. We had done it. We had crossed the border.

I jumped out of the hole. Crawling out after me was the centipede-shaped golem with Miriella on its back. I had used a continuous casting of "Earth Tunneling"—a tunnel-digging spell—to bore a hole into the earth with the golem, extending a horizontal tunnel to cross the border underground.

Of course, it was still slow. If I had tried to do that normally, Baron would have noticed the sound or the presence and interfered. The only reason we succeeded was thanks to the support fire from *them*.

—Them—namely—

"—Thanks. That was helpful."

At my voice, several shadows appeared from the depths of the fog. The members of the Serenius Kingdom Intelligence Department. In other words, Miriella's colleagues.

"Looks like we dragged you into this," one of them said. He was a man who looked like any other traveler, the kind you could see anywhere. Because the fog hadn't cleared, I couldn't see his face clearly.

"Seriously. This was a huge inconvenience for me," I said with a wry smile. The man replied in a nonchalant tone, "By the way—you were saying things like 'I'll tell everyone everything.' How much do you actually know?"

"Oh, that?" I shrugged. "That was obviously a bluff. All I really knew was that you guys had been sticking around us the whole time. But I figured if I said that, you'd help us out. You're curious about what I know, right?"

"...I see." The man's reply was mixed with a wry smile. Apparently, they realized it, too. That I had basically figured out the mechanics of the situation.

To put it simply—Miriella, or rather, the two of us, had been used as decoys. I didn't know what the Serenius intelligence agents were *actually* aiming for. Perhaps to get another agent back to the country, or to smuggle something into Serenius... In any case, they needed to divert Rihard's attention elsewhere. And Miriella, who was always "doing various things," was the one they had set their sights on.

The method was simple: give Miriella an order paper written as if she were contacting a comrade, and at the same time, tip off Rihard that she was a Serenius spy. Miriella would get caught, the order paper would be seized, and Rihard's agents would be busy searching for the nonexistent "contact." While Rihard was distracted by interrogating Miriella and searching for a phantom contact, the main mission would be carried out—that must have been the plan.

However, things had started to go wrong because she got the date wrong, contacted *me*, and escaped without getting caught. So, the Serenius agents had to change their plans in a hurry. They made *us* move in a flashy way to draw attention to this area. Sometimes they pretended to be assassins disguised as travelers to intentionally stop us and let the Rihard pursuers catch up; other times they tipped off our location; and still other times, they fired attack spells from the sidelines during our squabbles with the pursuers to make things look dramatic.

Just a moment ago, I had guessed they were nearby and shouted, "If you don't support us, I'll spill everything!"—and the fact that they responded meant their main mission was likely already finished. I didn't care if they had succeeded or failed.

...Of course, this was just something I had imagined based on the situation, but... I was probably not far off.

"—By the way—" I pointed with my eyes at Miriella, who was still idly snoring away. "I had an agreement with her that I'd get a reward if I got her across the border safely... I think it would be better for both of us if we handled that business-like, got any objections?"

"No. None at all. Thank you for your cooperation."

The man took a leather pouch from his coat and opened it to show me the inside. It was filled with shimmering gold coins. More than enough to cover what Miriella had promised. I kicked the pouch he tossed at me into the air and caught it with my hand.

"Okay. Oh, and also..." I pointed at Miriella again. "You guys should have her wash her hands of this world. Or put her in administration. I don't know what she'd say... but she's not cut out for this."

"I agree," the man nodded surprisingly easily. "Instead, why don't you take this job? You're well-suited for it."

"Maybe someday—" I acted as if I were considering his half-joking offer. "But not yet. I want to wander around a bit more."

"I see."

Taking his short reply as my cue, I turned on my heels and walked away from the scene. The men didn't say anything. I didn't look back, either.

What happened between Rihard and Serenius after that? Or did nothing happen at all? What became of the men, or Miriella? I didn't know. That was just how things were in the world of intelligence agents.

Well, if possible, I only prayed for one thing—that I'd never meet them again, and that Miriella had been relegated to the administrative department.

(Mission Possible: The End)

Save the Books [Part 1]

The moon hung high in the sky, illuminating the cloudless night. However, what now lit up the earth were countless artificial lights generated by magic. Around the building, and even up onto the roofs, numerous silhouettes crowded the area, their gazes fixed on the deep darkness beyond the reach of the light.

Half of those silhouettes were watching mages, and the other half were... flesh golems.

Although they were called golems, the manufacturing technique belonged to necromancy rather than spirit magic. While normal golems interfered with earth spirits to be created from soil or stone, these flesh golems were controlled by binding low-level spirits to preserved human or animal bones, flesh, and skin. They were closer to zombies than golems, but compared to zombies, they were 100% odor-free. Depending on how they were used, they were quite useful.

For instance—exactly. Using their appearance, which was indistinguishable from a human, to act as a deterrent against criminals—in other words, using them as scarecrows.

...Well, since their lack of flexibility was no different from a normal golem, they weren't particularly useful for this kind of guard duty.

—The job of guarding is easy to do half-heartedly, but difficult to do properly. If you stay on high alert for too long, your concentration won't hold; conversely, if you let your guard down too much, you risk overlooking something critical. In fact, even now, everyone’s concentration was beginning to wane, and a slack atmosphere was drifting through the area.

"—Something’s there!"

It was exactly at that moment that someone’s voice rang out. One of the guards pointed toward a thicket of garden trees a little way off from the building. "Over there! In the shadows of the garden trees!"

When I focused my awareness on the spot as told, I could indeed sense someone’s presence.

"What!? Where!?" "Are you serious!?"

The atmosphere in the area tightened in an instant. The mages started to rush toward the source of the voice, but—

"Stop! Do not leave your posts!"

Everyone froze at the sound of that voice. Every gaze was fixed on me—Lina

Inverse—as I stood stationed in front of the building entrance.

I continued, "It could be a diversion! You, the one who spoke first! Choose two others! Go and check it out together! The rest of you, stay at your posts! ...And... is this instruction alright, Nikea-san?"

"...Ah! Y-yes!"

Having been suddenly addressed by me, the young girl standing beside me hurriedly nodded her head up and down in a panic. She was about my age and wore the same plain black robe and black cloak as the other mages. Her chin-length blonde hair shone vividly under the magical lights. She seemed unconfident and timid, yet she—Nikea Sandedge—was the security chief here.

...Though, that was almost entirely in name only.

The mage who had raised his voice earlier walked toward the shadows of the trees with two companions—and before long, he came rushing back toward us, calling Nikea's name.

"Nikea-chan!"

What he was clutching in both hands was—

"…No way…!?" "That can't be..."

Nikea and I both let out the same exclamation at once.

"These were... in the shadows of the trees earlier...!"

The mage offered them up—several scrolls and several books. Nikea snatched one of the scrolls and unfolded it under the magical light...

"...This is...?"

Her voice was hoarse. Looking over her shoulder, it appeared to be something that described how to concoct magic potions—but the problem wasn't what was written on them.

"Why were they in a place like that!?" "...Then does that mean, Nikea-san... these are, perhaps...?"

To my mutterings, she gave a small nod and looked back. Beyond that—behind us—was the door to the archives, which should have been locked tight.

Guarding books. I had received such a request when I happened to stop by here, at the Sorcerers' Guild in Shurigan City.

Books. In other words, volumes and scrolls. To people without interest, they might have been trivial objects, but in reality, for us mages, these were quite valuable

items. Depending on the content written inside, some could even be traded for absurd sums of money.

The reason was simple: they couldn't be mass-produced. For instance, if one wanted to make another copy of a certain book, someone had no choice but to transcribe it using the original as a model.

I had been made to do this when I first joined the Sorcerers' Guild, but... it was exhausting. The parchment used differed subtly in quality from sheet to sheet. It was fine if you got a good sheet, but on a day when you hit a poor one, the pen nib would catch and drag, or parts of the paper would be too oily and repel the ink entirely.

You had to be extremely careful there. You had to copy it down meticulously with your pen, character by character, without a single mistake compared to the original. Once you finished copying a single scroll, that alone was enough to make you hate life.

...Even so, if the contents were harmless—like how to chant a light spell or a simple herbal concoction method—you could have apprentice mages at the guild copy them, or pay an outsider to do it. But—if the contents were the construction methods for attack spells or the formula for a magic potion that could also act as a poison, you certainly couldn't have apprentices or outsiders copy them.

In other words, only high-ranking members of the guild or their trusted confidants could transcribe important books. Either way, the number of such copies was extremely small. Yet, if they were books needed in many places, they would naturally fetch a high price. Among high-ranking guild members and hobbyists, the number of rare books and scrolls one possessed was even a kind of status symbol.

Gridai, the chairman of the Sorcerers' Guild here, was also a type of person who burned with passion for collecting books. With a large archive standing side-by-side with the guild building, it was said that most of the books stored there were his personal property, so you could imagine the scale of it.

Those books had recently been frequently vandalized. One day, when the door was opened, it was discovered that several books were scattered on the floor, torn apart, or smeared with ink. The damage was only a fraction—but how could the chairman, who had his cherished collection ruined, not be furious? He'd puffed himself up, determined to catch the culprit, and had set mages as guards—but the incident happened again, evading their eyes.

One dawn, after several days of nothing happening, the chairman received a report from the guards that there were no anomalies tonight either, so he opened the archive door—only to find more vandalized books.

Thus, the chairman grew even more enraged and requested protection from an outsider used to this kind of thing—that is, me, who just happened to be passing by.

...Honestly, I would have liked to decline such a terribly mundane request... but I

ended up accepting it because of the amount of the commission fee and the condition that I would be allowed to see his prized books if I succeeded.

—However, for the mages here, it wasn't exactly fun to be ordered around by an outsider, a little girl. To soften their feelings, they set up a security chief in name only, and I took the form of an advisor to her. That security chief was Nikea, who served as the librarian.

...Because of that position, I called her "Nikea-san" in front of everyone.

"…Probably…" she said, looking back and forth between the closed archive door and the scroll in her hand. "These were inside the archives."

The mages around us buzzed. I was also genuinely surprised, truthfully. However, if I panicked here, the confusion would spread to everyone else. I spoke in as calm a tone as possible.

"It might be a trick to confuse us. Maintain your posts without wavering."
"...Lina-san..."

To my comment, Nikea lowered her voice. "But just in case... shouldn't we check inside the archives? If a secret passage was dug..."

"You're right... We can't keep holding onto these books and scrolls forever, either... You have the key, right?" "Yes."

She held up the key hanging from her neck. I also took out the key I had been given from my robe. There were two locks at the entrance to the archives. It was impossible for one person to get inside alone. I left the guards with the other mages and Nikea and I opened the locks on the top and bottom of the door, one by one.

...*Creak*...

Inside the open door was darkness. I chanted a spell under my breath—

"Light!"

Pop!

The light that was born illuminated the inside of the archives—and there was absolutely nothing unusual. However, it was a place with many blind spots where bookshelves stood in rows. We stepped inside. There was no presence of a person. After taking a look around, there didn't seem to be any holes in the floor.

"...Doesn't seem to be anything wrong in here... Wait, Nikea, what are you doing?"
"Eh? What do you mean..."

Nikea was putting one of the books she was holding back onto the shelf, gesturing with the books she was carrying. "I'm returning these children to their original places."

These children, she said.

"...Look... just put them anywhere. If you want to organize them, do it tomorrow." "...But... these children..." "That's why I'm saying. It's more dangerous to keep the door open for a long time right now." "...Y-you're right... I understand."

At my persuasion, she placed the books and scrolls she was holding onto a nearby shelf with a *thud*. The two of us exited and locked the door again.

"...But if there was nothing unusual inside, why were those books and scrolls outside...?" "To induce our panic, they must have brought them out using some method beforehand—I can only think of that."

I responded to Nikea's question. —However, it seemed like this incident... was going to become quite complicated...

"What happened!? Is there something wrong with my books!?"

Chairman Gridai bellowed in his raspy voice when he visited the archives, not long after dawn had broken. He was a little over forty, with well-kept brown hair and neat clothes. If he were a little younger and thinner, he might have been called handsome. But his arrogant way of speaking could not be called pleasant by any stretch of the imagination.

"Something was wrong." "Whaaaat!?"

The chairman shouted and glared at my calm words. "W-wrong!? W-what about the books!? My books!?"

"...Ah. There was nothing wrong with the archives themselves. Only, I believe several books and scrolls were brought out during the day... they were found in the bushes a little way off in the middle of the night. As for damage..."

"What did you sayyy!?"

With his eyes bloodshot even more than before, he raised his voice.

"No, I told you, there's no damage." "There's *no* damage, you say?"

Still with blue veins popping out on his forehead, he said, "What are you talking about in your sleep!? You said they were found in the bushes a little way off! That means... my... my precious books were thrown into the dew-covered grass! What if they get damp and moldy!?"

"'My' books, not 'the association's'..." "It doesn't matter! I'm going to check their condition! Open the archive door right now! Quickly!"

Coming from my sleepless night, I found this attitude infuriating. *Wow, how annoying*. I felt like giving him a kick or two, but having accepted the job, even if he was rotten, he was the client.

I turned back to Nikea, composed myself, and said:

"Hahaha. Well then, Nikea, just as the esteemed Council Chairman is so eloquently demanding, let’s get this door open for him post-haste."

For some reason, her face went pale at my words, and she took a half-step back.

"...U-um! Excuse me... Lina-san... you aren't... incredibly furious right now, are you...?"

"Eh? Must be your imagination. Anyway, the key."

"Y-yes!"

With trembling hands, she pulled out a key, and together, we unlocked the two locks one by one.

The heavy door creaked open—

"*—!?*"

We were struck speechless, frozen where we stood.

Inside the archives, everything had been orderly the night before. But now, books and scrolls lay scattered across the floor—and every single one of them was smeared thick with black ink.

"Are you all incompetent!?"

Thump! The Chairman slammed his desk, his voice rising to a roar.

We were in the Chairman’s office at the Shurigan City Sorcerers' Guild. Nikea and I were the ones summoned for this lecture. The other mages who had been on guard duty were currently being forced to wash the stained books and tidy up the mess.

Naturally, without being given time for breakfast.

...Well... it was true that having someone successfully outwit us while we were standing guard was a failure on our part...

The Chairman glared sharply at Nikea.

"Nikea!"

Her body stiffened with a jolt.

" 'I love books. That is why I want to protect them.' That's what you said, wasn't it? Hmm? And so—based on that—I appointed you security chief. But how many failures does this make? Huh? Is that the extent of your so-called 'love for books'? Hmm? Whether you are incompetent or not is none of my concern, but if my books are damaged and it causes my stomach to ache, it is, quite frankly, a nuisance beyond measure!"

Wow. He really had a way with words. She couldn't say a thing. She just stood there trembling slightly, tears welling in her eyes.

"—I see, I see."

Adopting a breezy tone—or at least pretending to—I interjected from the side.

"So, if it had been the supremely competent Council Chairman, he never would have been outwitted. But since that competent Chairman wanted a good night's sleep in his bed, he left the scene to us incompetent fools, and as a result, the books were vandalized. Is that it?"

"—Wha—"

The Chairman went speechless, his face turning pale with indignation. I leaned over the desk.

"In that case, I'd certainly like you to teach us incompetent fools something. Just what kind of trick did the culprit use to pull that off yesterday? O-r... is my belief that the Chairman is competent just a misunderstanding, and you're actually at our level or lower? Surely thaaaaat couldn't be the case, right? Come on. Tell us. What exactly did the culprit do, and how?"

"...Li... Lina-san, you can't say things like that...! ...Could it be... you're saying that on purpose just to shield me...!?" Nikea whispered, tugging at my cloak.

...No... I was actually just teasing him because the Chairman was being an annoying jerk.

At my words, the Chairman’s face flushed bright red with rage.

"...Wha... wha...!? Just who do you think you are, acting so high and mighty...!"

"High and mighty? You misunderstand. I'm incompetent. Didn't you hear me say that? So, I’m asking the competent Chairman for some instruction. ...You understand the words, right? A competent Chairman like yourself."

"...Y-you... you... You brat!"

The rage on his face moved past red and began to turn black. He pointed a finger at me.

"What is with that attitude!? Just because you've done a few things on your travels and your name happens to be known, you think you can get cocky! You can't even lay a hand on a single petty thief! Show some restraint!"

"I'll show restraint, of course. Provided the person I'm talking to deserves it."

"I-I-I-Insolent! If you want to talk big...!"

"I’m not talking big. I never once said a competent Chairman like yourself wasn't worth showing restraint for."

I stated this calmly in a flat, rehearsed tone.

"Ugu-mwaaaaaaaah!"

The Chairman scratched his head frantically and pointed at both Nikea and me.

"Enough! Whatever! Since it’s come to this, both of you—"

"—Both of you, I hope for even greater efforts from here on."

.....

"...*Eh?*"

At the voice that suddenly cut in, Nikea, the Chairman, and I all let out a dumbfounded sound and looked toward the door. I wondered when they had arrived. Standing there with the office door wide open was a familiar face.

"Vice Chairman!?"

Chairman Gridai raised his voice.

She looked to be around thirty. She was a tall, silver-haired beauty. This was the Vice Chairman here—and the person who had directly requested my help with this case: Marline-Cunel.

...To be honest, if Gridai had been the one to ask, I never would have accepted.

She reportedly studied necromancy, and the flesh golems used as scarecrows for the previous guard shift had been provided by her. She met Gridai’s gaze of anger and reproach with a cool stare.

"If you let your emotions dictate and dismiss these two, a successor who doesn't know the culprit's methods will simply be toyed with in the same way. The damage would only increase. Surely that is not a situation you desire. Is it? Chairman."

"...Th... That may be so, but...!"

The Chairman fell silent for a moment.

"...Fine, I'll let it slide for Nikea! Her main job is librarian, after all. But! What about that one—Lina?"

He turned a furious glare toward the Vice Chairman.

"Vice Chairman, I ordered you to hire someone useful. And you set your sights on this Lina. But does she really have that much ability? I find that hard to believe. ...Perhaps you've been so immersed in your necromancy research that your eyes for the living have rotted? Hmm?"

He was just lashing out at everyone now.

"—You said a newcomer would get hit by the same trick... but that's no guarantee that *she* will ever see through the culprit's methods and catch them. I can see she's quite good at making people angry with her tongue, but I'd like to see that she's more than just talk. Otherwise, I can't afford to pay high fees to an ill-mannered incompetent and leave her with the keys to my precious archives."

"That is certainly true," Marline said calmly, turning toward me. "You encountered the incident last night. Well? Did you manage to grasp anything at all?"

—Of course—

I knew it. If I shrugged and said "nothing," Chairman Gridai would gleefully fire me on the spot. To be honest, I wasn't thrilled about working as a tedious guard under this rotten old man forever, either.

But if that happened, Marline, who had hired me, would lose face completely. And this idiot Chairman would undoubtedly use it as an excuse to badmouth me for ages. I hated that even more.

Resigned, I let out a sigh.

"...Well... at this point, all I can say for sure is... the culprit is someone on the inside, and the motive is a grudge against the Chairman involving books. That's about it."

"*Wha*."

Marline, Nikea, and the Chairman all cried out at once.

"W-wait a minute! A grudge against me!? An inside job!? How did you come to that conclusion!?" the Chairman shouted. "Don't just make things up because you're afraid of getting fired! For one thing, I have no recollection of ever acting in a way that would make people hold a grudge!"

"Wow, zero self-awareness. This old guy."

"What do you mean, zero self-awareness!?" he barked, his eyebrows twitching.

...Well, I guess if he had any, he would have changed his attitude by now...

"The culprit's goal is harassment, plain and simple. You can see that, right?"

"...Hmph... no... that's not necessarily the case. Come to think of it, I've heard rumors of a person appearing in various places to burn specific books. Perhaps it's that person."

He hated agreeing with me so much that he was dragging out suspicious rumors. I just shrugged.

"I don't know what kind of rumors you've heard, but that's strictly about 'specific books,' right? But this time, it's 'a few books at a time from these archives.' It's completely different."

I was tired of being polite to this guy, so I spoke in my usual tone.

"In this case, the key point is 'a few at a time.' If they just wanted to get rid of the books, there are plenty of faster ways. They could blow the whole building away with a Dragon Slave. Or smash the wall with a Vibration Bomb and toss a Fireball inside. Even if they couldn't use magic, security wasn't this tight before the incidents started; they could have slipped in while the door was open, splashed some oil, and set it ablaze. That would be it. But instead—the culprit is taking this roundabout way of messing with the books here bit by bit by bit. It's as if they're making a fool of someone. What is that if not harassment? So, who is the target? If they had a grudge against the Guild itself, there would be no point in targeting only books. But so far, only books are being hit. And the vast majority of those are the Chairman's personal property. So, the culprit's goal is to harass the Chairman by slowly damaging his collection. That's the logical conclusion, isn't it?"

"B-but... why would I be targeted...?" the Chairman asked, still displaying zero self-awareness.

"...Those books you collected... there are quite a lot of them... Is it possible that among them are some you obtained through, say, rather forceful methods?"

"H-how rude! Every one of them was obtained through proper, legal procedures!"

"Whether it's legal or not doesn't matter. The question is whether you've earned someone's resentment."

"...Hmph... Then, what is your basis for it being an inside job!? To suggest such an unscrupulous person is within this Guild...! It makes it sound as though I lack personal popularity!"

You do.

I wanted to snap that back immediately, but I knew he'd just start whining again. I kept the retort to myself.

"As for how the culprit did it, I honestly don't know at this moment. But in any case, the culprit is intimately familiar with the structure of the archives and the security system, and they have a grudge against the Chairman. Furthermore, it's a fact that several books were taken outside last night. The archives are open to Guild members during the day. We're on guard, sure, but it's impossible for someone to just wander in from outside and sneak books out. Only a member of this Guild could do that. It's only reasonable to assume it's an inside job, right?"

"...Mmu... ugh..."

At my words, the Chairman turned a suspicious eye toward Nikea and Marline.

"If... if that's true... then trusting insiders too much or excluding outsiders is actually a bad move... In that case, I might as well hire mercenaries..."

"N-no, you can't!"

The voice came from Nikea, who had been silent beside me the whole time. The Chairman’s eyebrow twitched.

"Is there a problem, Nikea? Or could it be that *you* are the culprit?"

"N-no!"

"Then why do you object!?"

"For a mage like Lina-san, it's one thing... but can you really stand to have mercenaries, who don't know the value of books, handling them so roughly!?"

"...Hmph... That is certainly... a concern. .....Very well. Lina Inverse. You will continue to handle the resolution of this matter. However—I am dismissing Nikea as security chief. In her place, Vice Chairman, I want to entrust that role to you. Is that clear?"

"Eh!?"

"I don't mind," Marline said calmly, while Nikea cried out in surprise.

"B-but Chairman...!"

"You have already failed multiple times," the Chairman said to the flustered Nikea in a cold tone. "Furthermore, if there is suspicion of an inside job, you are one of the suspects. I cannot leave someone in charge who is both suspicious and prone to failure."

"...I see... I understand..." Nikea slumped her shoulders, turned to Marline, and bowed. "...Then... please... take good care of the books..."

"I will," Marline replied with a firm nod.

The moon shone brightly in the center of the sky, dominating the cloudless night. But now, the ground was illuminated by countless lights created by magic. Mages on guard duty filled the area around the archives, even up on the roof, casting their gazes into the depths of the darkness where the light couldn't reach.

It was the same night watch as always. But unlike before, the person standing beside me wasn't Nikea, but Vice Chairman Marline-Cunel. And currently, there were no flesh golems among the guards. If the culprit was an insider who knew the situation, there was no point in putting up scarecrows.

It was now the fifth day since the previous incident. I had investigated various things since then, but I still hadn't grasped the culprit’s identity or their method. There were simply too many people with a motive. In fact, almost every Guild member resented the Chairman to some degree.

To name a few: books were taken away under the guise of "confiscation" over minor pretexts; when someone lent him a book, he’d insist he "lost it" and force

them to accept a small compensation fee—only for that book to inevitably turn up in his personal collection later; people were lectured for half a day over trivialities; sexual harassment; his vulgar laugh. Et cetera, et cetera.

He was such a perfectly realized petty villain. I wouldn't say there's *no* other Chairman as troublesome as him, but he was certainly a rare breed. This meant it was difficult to narrow down the culprit based on motive alone—and the approach based on method was also proving difficult.

There were ventilation ducts in the archives, but to keep out insects and dust, they were bent up and down, and the openings were covered with mesh. It would be impossible for a person to enter, let alone for someone to send in small stone puppets or familiars to pull any tricks. Narrow gaps in the door were also out.

Based on interviews and on-site investigation, there was no sign of a secret door. If someone had, for example, made a hole with magic and then sealed it back up, some trace of it should remain, but there was none of that either.

In that case, that night of the incident. When books were found outside, and Nikea and I opened the archive door to check inside. *That* must be where the culprit found their opportunity. I understood that much, but—if asked what exactly they did, I honestly didn't know.

I considered the possibility that the books found outside were rigged, but the scroll I looked at with Nikea at the time didn't seem abnormal... and it was hard to imagine someone sneaking inside and hiding while we had the door open. There was no sign of anyone then, and if they had done that, they should have been spotted when we left—or when we opened the door again.

The days passed without an answer—and then, today. The anomaly occurred, as expected, around midnight.

Rustle...

The sound of undergrowth swaying. It wasn't the wind. The leaves on the trees nearby were hardly moving. Which meant—

"Is someone there?" Marline whispered in a sharp tone. She had been leaning her back against the door.

Tension ran through the group.

"Nobody move. I'll go take a look," I said, killing my footsteps as I walked toward the sound.

Without a doubt, there was a human presence there.

Rustle... rustle-rustle...

I could still hear the sound of the bushes shaking. I held my breath, gauged the distance—

Flash! I leaped out in front of it!

"Whoa!?"

"D-don't scare me like that! Well? Is everyone working diligently?"

The person there was none other than Chairman Gridai.

"...Ch... Chairman? Why are you in a place like this?"

I asked, dumbfounded. He puffed out his chest unnecessarily.

"Hmph. I couldn't sleep. I just came to check things out while on a stroll..."

"It’s confusing, so go home and sleep!"

Whack.

My kick, launched with a shout, buried itself squarely in the Chairman's face.

"...So... there were no anomalies, then."

The Chairman, with a bruise on his face, visited the archives shortly after dawn, as was his routine.

"Other than me kicking a strange man who showed up on a whim in the middle of the night."

At my report, a vein briefly popped on the Chairman's forehead, but—

"...Fine! Regardless, open the archives. I'm going to check the interior."

Nodding, Marline and I each pulled out a key and unlocked the door.

Creeeeeeeak...

The heavy door groaned open—

"*—!?*"

We were struck speechless, frozen where we stood.

Inside the archives, which had not been opened once all night. A place where no one should have entered. But now, books and scrolls lay scattered across the floor—and every single one of them was smeared thick with black ink.

(To be continued!)

The crime has been committed again, slipping through Lina's guard! Who is the culprit!? What is their method!? Most importantly, can Lina find an excuse to beat that incredibly annoying Chairman black and blue!?

(Author's Note: That's a crime. Good kids shouldn't mimic her ♪)

Regardless, the next episode: "Save the Books" Part 2! Wait for it while dreaming of grilled matsutake mushrooms!

Save the Books [Part 2]

The Sorcerers' Guild in Shurigan City. There, a mysterious incident was occurring where books inside a locked archive were being vandalized and stained with ink! Lina stepped in to solve the case.

Chairman Gridai, a man with a nasty personality who collected books through forceful means. Vice Chairman Marline, a necromancer. Nikea, the librarian.

The human relationships weren't all that tangled. And now, right in front of Lina—no, right behind her, inside the locked archives, the incident had happened again!

"...What... is this..."

Chairman Gridai's voice was tight and raspy. He started to stagger into the archives—

"Stop!"

The voice that froze him in his tracks was none other than mine.

"Nobody go in. Investigation first."

I chanted a spell under my breath—

"Lighting!"

I let the light of magic I created float near the ceiling of the archives.

On the floor a little way in from the entrance was a mountain of stained books—though the volume was much smaller compared to last time. From the look of it, there were a little over ten books and scrolls combined.

There was a gap at the bottom of the black bookshelf nearby. They had likely been taken from there.

The black ink staining the books smelled like the very common kind used for transcription. In other words, anyone could have gotten their hands on it. Rather than the ink being splashed, it felt as though the pile of books had been mixed around haphazardly with a wet brush.

Perhaps the culprit had been in a great hurry; some books only had a bit of ink on

the cover, while others—like certain scrolls—were smeared so completely black that you couldn't even tell what was written on them.

—Hmm...

I gently picked up one of the blackened scrolls to examine it. The ink was already dry, but the parchment must have been of poor quality; grease from the hide was seeping through heavily. When I gave the scroll a light squeeze, the ink that had dried and hardened on the surface flaked off with a crackle.

From the characters visible underneath, it seemed what was written was the basic theory of Shamanism or something similar. I also took a quick look around the interior of the archives, but as before, there were no anomalies.

"Well!? Did you find anything!?"

The Chairman asked from behind in an irritated voice. I gave a small shrug.

"Who knows..."

"It’s not 'who knows'! You brat, didn't you say there were no anomalies except for my arrival!? What is this then!? This mess!? And on top of that, you say you don't know anything..."

"Whoooooo said 'I don't know anything'?"

"—Then—! You've figured it out!?"

His voice turned to one of anticipation. I gave a small shrug.

"Who knows."

"Which is it!?"

I stood up and turned to the Chairman.

"I told you. The culprit is likely an insider. Whether I've grasped something or not, I can't just blabber about it in a place like this where everyone is listening, can I?"

"...I see. Then later, you can tell your thoughts to me alone."

"Ah, that's also a no."

"Why not!?"

I scratched my head at the Chairman's retort.

"...Because... if you hear what I have to say, you might start making all sorts of assumptions, and that might unconsciously show in your attitude, right? If that happens, the culprit might sense it and change their methods. At worst, there's a danger they might do something reckless like burning all the books in one go. That would be a problem, wouldn't it?"

"Th-that would be a problem! ...Indeed... hmph... a problem..."

He seemed convinced, albeit unsatisfied.

"Fine. I won't ask. However, do not forget for a moment that this is no time for leisure."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

I looked him in the eye and gave a firm nod.

"Are you having lunch? Lina-san."

I was spoken to just as I was about to leave the Guild for a slightly early lunch, having finished a round of investigation and interviews.

I turned to see the former security chief, Nikea Sandedge, looking as timid as ever.

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"...Um... if it’s alright... may I join you for lunch...?" she asked timidly.

...Hmm...

"Sure. Actually, if you have a recommended place, please show me."

"Ah, yes. In that case, there's a place with delicious lamb dishes. How does that sound?"

"Lamb sounds great. Let's go with that, then."

"Yes. This way."

The two of us started walking side-by-side.

Shurigan City at midday was reasonably lively. It was a bit small to be called a "city," and there weren't many people, but it was a nice town, moderately developed with nature still remaining.

We walked down the street where people passed by in silence for a while—

"—So? What did you want to talk to me about?"

"—Eh!?"

At my question, Nikea turned a surprised gaze toward me and stopped walking.

"An incident happened between last night and this morning. And then you asked to have lunch with me. It’s only natural to assume you have something to talk about, right?" I said, giving a wink.

"Ah, yes. Um... those books that were damaged this time... can they be properly restored...?"

"...Everyone is working hard on them right now."

"...I see..."

The next morning arrived.

As was his habit, the Chairman came by the archives to inspect the situation, and Marline—with a perfectly straight face—confessed to her crime and concluded with that brazen offer.

The Chairman's eyes nearly popped out of his head as he screamed. The gathered mages all stumbled back in shock. Naturally, I was right there among them, nearly tripping over myself.

...Taking responsibility? So that's how she's playing it...

"There should be no problem now," Marline stated calmly.

"OF COURSE THERE'S A PROBLEM!" the Chairman immediately barked back. "You vandalized someone's personal books and you think saying you'll buy them makes it okay!? Do you think you can just get away with that!? I am stripping you of your position as Vice Chairman!"

"With all due respect, while it is true I stained the books, I have stated that I will pay for them. And yet, you intend to revoke my status over this?"

"I do!"

"—I understand—" Marline replied. She spun around to face the crowd. "Everyone, you heard him. Dismissal is a valid decision. Therefore, we must immediately move to elect a new Chairman and Vice Chairman."

"......Eh?" A chorus of confused, blank voices rose from the mages.

"...W-wait a minute!" the Chairman called out, panicked. "What is this!? What do you mean, 'elect a new Chairman and Vice Chairman'!?"

Marline turned an incredulous gaze toward him. "Did you not just say it yourself? That anyone who commits the act of vandalizing another's books—even if they offer to pay for them afterward—should be stripped of their status. In the past, you stained a book of mine regarding necromancy and forced payment on me to take it away. Therefore, the moment you made that declaration, your own status was automatically revoked as well."

Whoa, she actually went there.

The Chairman's face turned a deep shade of crimson from a mix of rage and

shame. "T-that logic is...! This case and that one are...!"

As he stammered, the gathered mages began to give him the cold shoulder, their gazes filled with icy contempt. It seemed even he couldn't withstand the pressure.

"...Argh! Fine, I get it! I withdraw my statement about revoking your status! Is that enough for you, Vice Chairman!?"

However, she slowly shook her head. "No. You no longer have the authority to make such a decision, *former* Chairman. ——Now then, everyone. A re-election for Chairman and Vice Chairman. I assume we are all in agreement?"

"No! Wait...!"

The former Chairman's protests were easily drowned out by the roar of approval from the mages.

Naturally, there was no chance that the former Chairman Gridai—whose popularity was... well, *that*—would be re-elected. I suppose the moral of the story is: watch how you treat people.

A cool breeze drifted in through the wide-open doors of the archives. Most of the books were now accessible to everyone, and I heard that all the bookshelves would be replaced with white ones soon.

And so, the incident was over, and a tentative peace returned to the Shurigan City Sorcerers' Guild. Incidentally, the newly elected Chairman turned out to be Marline...

Hmm. Not bad, Marline-Cunel.

Her logic was pure sophistry, but by winning over everyone's emotions and utilizing the "violence of numbers," she easily dragged Gridai down to the rank of a commoner and climbed to the top herself. At this point, I'm starting to suspect that even me seeing through her trick was part of her calculations.

"Thank you for everything, Lina-san."

Nikea gave me a deep bow as I prepared to depart. By the discretion of the new Chairman, her crimes were overlooked, and she was allowed to return to her job as a librarian. She gazed at the books lined up in the archives with a refreshed expression.

"Now the books can finally be read by everyone. ...This turned out for the best, didn't it?"

"Beats me."

"So cold!"

"...Well, just make sure you stay well."

Brushing off her comment, I turned on my heel and left the Sorcerers' Guild behind.

But I wonder if Nikea or the other mages realize it. For now, things are fine. But if Marline ever—by some one-in-a-million chance—turned into a tyrant, she would be a much nastier opponent to deal with than someone like Gridai.

Still—it's none of my business. I got my reward for solving the case, so I'm happy. Either way, the peace of the books was preserved!

And so, without worrying about the small details, I left the Shurigan City Sorcerers' Guild behind—

Wait, is this really okay?

(Save the Books: The End)

Shocking! The Emotional Inn of the Rain

The rain still hasn't stopped.

In the dining room on the first floor of the small inn, the same group of people had been loitering for several days with nothing to do. Topics for small talk had run dry, leaving only the sound of the rain to fill the time.

"Aaaargh! This is so boring!"

Unable to stand the heavy atmosphere, I finally shouted out.

I was stuck at a small, solitary inn sitting by a river far off the main highway. The rain had pinned me down. Normally, a ferry would go back and forth across the river, carrying people and goods, and the dining room would be fairly bustling... but for the past few days, the relentless rain had kept the boats docked. Consequently, both cargo and travelers were at a standstill.

And among them was none other than me, Lina Inverse.

——I do have spells that allow me to fly. If I really wanted to, I could cross to the other side—but even if I did, it would still be raining there. The only difference would be which inn I was using for shelter. In the end, the situation wouldn't change. Since I wasn't in a hurry, I decided to wait for the rain to let up, but—

This was now the third day. The rain occasionally weakened, but showed no sign of stopping.

"Hahaha. Lina-chan, why don't you tell us another one of your exciting, funny stories?"

The speaker was Tremer, a traveling merchant sitting at a nearby table. He was a friendly, slightly chubby man with a black beard, also trapped by the weather.

"Another one of those tall tales?"

A blond man named Addis smirked from another table. He was a bit too young to be called middle-aged but a bit too old to be called a youth. I had shared various travel stories here to kill time, but he seemed convinced they were all pure fiction.

"Who cares? They’re interesting," said Tosh, a red-haired young man about three or four years older than me. He had been caught in the rain while returning from delivering goods for his father.

"I like Lina-chan's stories, too," added the landlady, who ran both the inn and the shop by herself.

Including me, there were five of us in total. That was everyone currently at the

inn.

"...Alright then... let's see..."

Sharing stories of my exploits (or my embarrassments) isn't exactly my hobby, but it was the only way to kill time.

"How about the time I had a fashion showdown with a weird female sorcerer?"

"Here it comes. Her favorite topic: the 'weird female sorcerer,'" Addis said mockingly, though he still moved to a closer seat. He called my stories tall tales, but he still hovered around—probably because he was just that bored.

"You're talking about that Naga person from your other stories, right? There's no way a creature like that exists in reality."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha." I gave a dry laugh at his remark.

If only that were true, my life would be so much easier. I waited for everyone to gather around the table before I opened my mouth.

"It happened when I went to a certain town..."

Before I could even finish the intro, I cut my words short. I heard it. A sound.

I turned my gaze toward the entrance of the inn. Everyone else followed my lead. Amidst the sound of rain hitting the roof and the earth, I heard the sound of footsteps splashing through the mud, approaching us.

A traveler? In this downpour?

Under everyone's watchful eyes, the front door creaked open, and a woman stepped inside...

.....Wait.....

"GYAAAAAAAH!?"

The moment I saw her, I let out a nonsensical scream, dashed forward, grabbed her by the collar, and shoved her right back outside under the eaves.

The evening sky was a deep, murky gray, with no sun in sight—only falling rain. It matched my mood perfectly.

"What was that for!? ...Wait... you!"

The woman recognized me, her eyes widening in surprise.

Yes. It was a face I knew. She looked about fifteen or sixteen, with a sharp gaze and short-cropped black hair. She was dressed like a swordsman, wearing light armor and carrying a longsword.

Her name was Marlene Ridepark.

A while back, I had taken a job from her mother. She wanted help finding her runaway daughter—Marlene. The job itself was fine. But her mother was... how should I put this... she had an aura similar to my sister back home. In other words, she was exactly the type of person I can't handle.

It’s hard to explain that aura to someone who doesn't know it... but if I had to try, she was the kind of person who reminds you that physical appearance has nothing to do with attack power. Even if she looks like a kitten, a tiger is still a tiger.

...I wonder how many "strong" guys have challenged my sister over the years, only to end up with their confidence—and their skulls—dented?

Anyway, after a lot of trouble back then, Marlene’s dad—I mean, father—showed up, and the two of them took Marlene back home. And for her to suddenly pop up here again meant—

"—Don't tell me you ran away from home again!?" I asked in a hushed whisper.

If that were the case, I might end up having to deal with those two transcendental parents of hers again. (By the way, her father apparently belongs to some complicated government organization. To put it simply, they’re a "like-minded" married couple.) Either way, they weren't the type I wanted to get involved with.

However, she calmly gave a small shake of her head. "No. My father ordered me to. He told me to come here today."

"Oh, thank goodness. Then it's not— wait, 'ordered'? Does that mean... is this some kind of test for you...?"

When I asked tentatively, her expression turned grim. "—That is how I have interpreted it."

...Ugh... Gyaaaaaaaargh!

I screamed internally and almost collapsed onto my knees. When I got dragged into one of their "tests" before, the mother was targeting me while Marlene had to stop her—I genuinely thought I was going to die.

But this wasn't the time to give up. I pulled myself together and asked, "D-don't tell me it's another 'protect someone' thing!?"

"No, it's... he just told me to come here, search near the fireplace, and follow the instructions."

"—The fireplace?"

Marlene and I looked at each other. We stood in silence for a moment amidst the sound of the rain—and then we both bolted at the same time.

We burst into the dining room, ran past the tables, and scrambled toward the

fireplace in the corner, searching frantically around the small fire. Under the piled-up firewood, in the cracks of the bricks...

"——Found it!"

One brick came loose, and from beneath it, I pulled a scrap of parchment. When I cried out, Marlene dashed over and snatched it from my hand.

She crouched down and I peered over her shoulder. We both swallowed hard as she unfolded the parchment. Written there was a single word:

Good luck.

"AT WHAT!?" we both screamed in shock. What on earth were we supposed to do with that?

"Marlene, what is the meaning of this!?"

"I don't—I don't—I don't know!"

The meaning was completely unknown. But there was one thing I knew for sure. This place was dangerous.

I snapped my right hand up. "Oh, wait! I just remembered I left a pot of stew on the fire at home! I have to get back right away! Tee-hee! Bye!"

As I turned to leave, Marlene's hand clamped onto my arm like a vice. "Heh heh heh. You think I'll let you run away alone?" Her eyes were bloodshot.

"What are you talking about!? I have absolutely nothing to do with this!" I argued, my eyes tearing up.

She stepped in front of me, grabbed both my shoulders, and stared into my eyes. "Think about it calmly. If this is a test, don't you think my father is watching this place from somewhere?"

"Well... probably..."

"Then, if someone suddenly bolts out of here the moment I arrive, how do you think my father will view that person?"

"...B-but still... it's not like he'd just attack for no reason..."

"Without knowing his intent? Can you guarantee your safety? Conversely, if running outside is harmless, then it's possible that staying here is harmless as well."

"Don't give me that twisted logic! Based on that 'Good luck' message, the most likely scenario is that your dad is going to attack you, and you have to hold out for a set amount of time! You're just scared to be alone, so you're trying to drag me into it!"

"—ack...!"

I hit the nail on the head. Marlene flinched for a second. "If you won't help, I could just report to my father that 'Lina Inverse interfered with me.'"

"Whoa, that’s dirty!"

"Utilizing the situation is part of the strategy... or so my father says. Since you happen to be here, using you is a valid tactic. ——Actually, knowing him, he might have even factored your presence here into his calculations."

"Stop calculating me without my permission! Anyway, I am not getting involved in this!"

"No, it's too late. I don't know my father's intent, but either way, the 'something' must have started the moment I arrived. The reality is that we don't know what will happen if we move carelessly."

"No matter what you say—"

Just as I was about to finish—!

I felt a presence behind me! Terror surged up my spine!

"GYAAAAAAAH!"

Screaming in unison, Marlene and I both threw a punch as we spun around, catching the jaw of the figure standing behind us!

CRASH!

The figure went flying and hit the floor hard. It was... the landlady.

Ah! Oops! Because of all the scary talk, we had overreacted. I panicked and started to rush toward her—but—

"Wait!" Marlene stopped me. "Don't get close! It could be my mother in disguise! I’m telling you, even I can't see through my parents' disguises! She might have taken a weak hit on purpose to make us let our guard down!"

My feet stopped dead. Marlene had said it was an order from her father... but if the goal was to test their daughter, it was highly likely the mother was helping. She could have arrived here before us and disguised herself as the landlady. If so, approaching carelessly would be...

"—What are you people doing!?"

The voice that cut through my thoughts belonged to a man. I snapped out of it and looked over. I had completely forgotten in the chaos of Marlene’s arrival, but there were three other guests here. They were standing by a distant table, looking at us as if we were insane.

The one who shouted was Addis, the blond man.

"What are you thinking? Who is this woman? You both run outside, come back and start searching everywhere... and now you just punch the landlady!?"

"...Well..." I was at a loss for words. If I told the truth, they wouldn't believe me anyway...

"I cannot explain the circumstances," Marlene stated flatly, leaving me behind as I struggled to find a convincing lie. "Just cooperate."

"Don't screw with me!" Addis screamed in rage. A perfectly normal reaction.

"...You're going to have to... give us an explanation," the landlady groaned, pushing herself up while shaking her head. She hadn't been knocked out, and she was glaring at us with a terrifying look in her eyes. "If you refuse, I have ways of dealing with this, too."

Ugh... this is bad. At this rate, things are just going to get more and more complicated. In that case... uh... uh...

"She's a military investigator!" Before I knew it, the lie had tumbled out of my mouth.

"I-investigator!?"

As Addis stood there dumbfounded, I doubled down. "Yes! She's currently working on a certain case. And I'm... well, I'm sort of assisting her..."

"...I told you not to speak..." Marlene said with a sigh, playing along with my impulsive lie. She took a step forward and looked at the still-dazed landlady. "I apologize for what happened; you standing behind us caught me off guard. I cannot reveal the details of the investigation, but you will cooperate regardless. That is all."

Wow. She’s actually a pretty good actor. Faced with such a one-sided declaration, the landlady and the guests fell silent. A heavy, awkward air hung over the room.

And it didn't look like the rain was going to stop anytime soon—

"That was a good lie, Lina-san."

After apologizing to the landlady and finishing a very awkward dinner, we retreated to my room on the second floor. Marlene followed me inside and spoke as soon as we were alone.

"...Don't call it a 'good lie'..." I muttered, exhausted.

Sure, the lie had silenced everyone, but it didn't solve anything. I still didn't know her father’s plan, and my safety was far from guaranteed.

"Anyway, good luck with the rest. I’m leaving now."

"Leaving? Where?" Marlene asked as I turned toward the window.

"Where do you think? To the other side of the river, or anywhere else... basically, somewhere else. I couldn't exactly say 'goodbye' in front of the others after that lie, but I have no obligation to stick around for this."

"W-wait! Even if you say the other side of the river, the ferry is—"

"I can fly using magic." I stated bluntly.

The rain was still falling, but with a high-speed flight spell encased in a wind barrier, I could cross the river without even getting wet. I had only stayed here because I had no reason to rush. But now that Marlene was here, I had a very good reason to leave.

"Anyway—"

I started to speak, then stopped. I noticed it. Marlene likely did too. We both kicked the door open and sprinted into the hallway—

In that instant—

BOOM!

The room we had been in just moments ago blew apart!

——An attack spell!

The shockwave swept right past us as we bolted into the hallway.

Marlene and I dashed toward the stairs. The murderous intent we both felt had definitely come from outside.

——There was no doubt now; this was Marlene’s test.

I was certain of it.

Her father was likely capable of attacking without projecting any killing intent at all, but that wouldn't make for a very good test. She would just be blown up, and that would be the end of it.

The goal was to see if she could sense the intent and the location—and then how she would respond. He must have released that bloodlust on purpose to see how she’d react.

If this was a test, the passing grade probably depended on how she survived the ambush and whether she could capture or defeat the assailant.

We scrambled down the stairs and cut across the first-floor dining room.

"Hey!? What was that? Did you do something again!?"

Ignoring the landlady’s accusatory shout, we dove outside.

It was a rainy night.

The faint lamplight leaking from the inn was useless; outside was nothing but pure darkness.

The inn didn't seem to be on fire from the previous attack, but I couldn't see a thing. I chanted a spell—

"Lighting!"

I created a ball of magical light and tossed it into the empty air.

The muddy ground, the thin lines of falling rain, and the silhouettes of the garden trees and the inn were illuminated.

As I circled toward the side of the inn—where the attacker had been—I started chanting my next spell under my breath—

"I won't let you!"

"Nbugh!?"

Marlene suddenly tackled me, and we both went face-first into the muddy ground with a wet *thud*.

Covered in mud, I managed to scramble up.

"What was that for!?"

"It’s no use trying to trick me! You were just secretly chanting a flight spell to try and escape in the confusion, weren't you?"

...Ugh! She’s sharp in all the wrong places...

"Don't you act all high and dry after dragging me into this mess!"

"If I act humble, I'll end up facing my father alone! I refuse!"

Wow, she actually said it!

"Then tell that to your father yourself!"

"As if I could!"

We glared at each other in the pouring rain.

...Wait...

I let the tension drain from my shoulders.

"...This is stupid. Glaring at you here isn't going to change anything..."

I muttered and turned on my heel.

"Where are you going?"

"Back inside the inn. We can argue under a roof."

"Aren't you going to chase my father!?"

"...He's long gone by now. While we were busy acting like idiots."

"...!"

Realizing the futility of her position, she followed behind me.

We returned to the inn and sat down at a random table in the dining room.

The landlady looked at us and grumbled, "I don't care what's going on, I want no part of this trouble." She hurried into the back, clearly wanting to avoid getting involved.

"...Now then. Back to what we were talking about."

With rain dripping from my hair, I spoke up.

"You want me to help you. But I want nothing to do with this."

——Even so, I knew she would just keep pestering me if I left it at that.

Therefore...

"If you *really* want my help that badly, the proper way to go about it is to provide a formal request with proper compensation, don't you think?"

"...You're telling me to hire you..." Marlene muttered bitterly.

"—Fine. I'll give you ten gold coins."

"Hah?"

I frowned openly at her offer.

"I don't know what your father's goal is, but there's a chance I'll have to face both him and your mother. And for *ten* gold coins? That's not even a good joke."

"Then how much—"

"—Let's see..."

I made a show of thinking.

"The request will be... since I can't do this forever, I'll provide full support until the rain stops. One hundred gold coins, cash in advance."

"One hundred!?" she shrieked.

——This was my ultimate move: the "Refusal Attack" disguised as a negotiation! I named a cash amount I was sure she wouldn't have on her—

"—Fine."

.....

"?"

"It hurts, but I'll manage."

She slowly removed her light armor and began unfastening gold coins that had been sewn into the lining, counting them one by one.

The heavy clinking of metal continued for a while.

"...Why do you carry that much cash on you...?"

"One must always be prepared for the worst. That's how I was raised."

...I see... does this mean I'm still too soft?

But even so, facing off against her father...

"...U-um, Marlene..."

"My father hates liars."

She cut me off without even looking up from her counting.

"Surely you aren't going to change the terms now."

...Ugh...

"That's a hundred. I have delivered them to you."

"Ah. No. Well."

As I sat there stammering in front of the pile of gold—

BOOM!

The sound of another attack spell exploding echoed through the air!

——!?——

We exchanged looks.

The sound came from outside. If so, it couldn't have been aimed at us.

I pocketed the gold for the time being, and we both rushed out.

The magical light I had cast earlier was still glowing, stuck to a tree branch nearby. However, the light only served to emphasize the depth of the surrounding darkness.

"—Look!"

Marlene shouted.

At the very edge of the ring of light, I could just barely see something.

Was that—a person—!?

We ran toward it. I chanted a spell—

"Lighting!"

Illuminated by the new light, the figure on the ground was revealed: it was one of the guests, the red-haired youth, Tosh, scorched by an attack spell.

"...What... what is going on...?"

The blond man, Addis, finally broke the long, heavy silence with a low groan.

Tosh had narrowly survived; we had treated him and I had cast a healing spell, but he was still unconscious in another room.

Faced with one disaster after another, everyone in the inn had gathered.

Naturally, their suspicious gazes were focused on Marlene—and me.

Addis looked back and forth between us.

"Ever since you arrived... no, ever since you two got together, this started! You two didn't do this to Tosh, did you!?"

"Of course not!" I denied it immediately, waving my hands frantically.

"We were attacked too! We were in the dining room when we heard an explosion outside... and when we went to check, we found him. Think about it. We're the ones who brought him back inside. If we wanted to hurt him, we would have finished him off out there!"

"But it's a fact that all this started once you two were both here!"

"The timing is like that, but..."

I trailed off, exchanging an awkward glance with Marlene.

Only the two of us knew. This was likely Marlene's test—her father's doing.

Prevent random attacks. That was likely the task given to her. But of course, we couldn't say that out loud.

"But why was Tosh outside in this rain anyway?" I tried to change the subject.

"Why...?" Addis stammered.

"Because he was trying to run away," Tremer, the merchant, said calmly.

"Run away? Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Tremer looked at Marlene with exasperation. "You—a military investigator—showed up for some 'investigation.' You won't tell us what's happening... but it's clearly serious. Then a big explosion happens. He probably figured getting rained on was better than staying here and decided to bolt. Then someone caught him... Honestly, I feel like running away myself."

"Exactly," Addis agreed. "You didn't see Tosh running and think he was a suspect and blow him up, did you?"

He glared at us.

"Of course not," I denied immediately, feigning composure.

But that didn't change the look in Addis's eyes—in fact, even Tremer and the landlady were looking at us with suspicion.

...Ugh... this is bad... really bad...

"—Anyway. Everyone, please don't wander around alone. Oh, and we're going to borrow another room, so thanks."

I forced the conversation to an end and hurried upstairs with Marlene. The gazes of the other guests felt like needles in our backs.

"...What are we going to do? This is really bad."

We had moved to a different room on the second floor and changed our clothes.

It was two doors down from the room that had been blown up.

If any light leaked out, our location would be given away, so we kept the shutters closed and the lamp dimmed. The faint orange glow barely illuminated the silhouettes of the bed and other furniture.

In that dim light, Marlene and I spoke in hushed tones.

"I know that," she spat out grumpily.

"The test is probably to stop random attacks. ...Your mother did the same thing, dragging innocent people into it... Tosh seems like he'll live, but this is still way beyond a joke."

"I agree. It’s unlike my father. But regardless, we have to do something."

"The problem is how. It's nearly impossible to find someone hiding outside in this. If he’s seriously hiding his presence, I don't even know if we can detect him. Which means... we just have to wait for him to move... hmmm..."

"Being reactive isn't ideal. ——However——"

She trailed off and looked at me.

"——What?"

"Nothing. I just thought it was funny how you were so against this until a moment ago."

"...Well..." I sighed. "I still hate it, but now that things have turned out like this, my conscience would bother me if I just ran away and said 'not my problem.' Plus, I already accepted the fee."

And if I try to run away alone, her dad might hunt me down, I added silently.

"We can't predict when or where he'll strike—he's not the kind of opponent we can outsmart. Remember, he's a higher caliber than us in this kind of fight. Stick to the basics and don't let your guard down."

"True... that's about all we can do."

"...Okay, I'm going to take a break, so you take the first watch."

I thought she might say something like, "Wait, I'm the client here," but—

"Understood," she replied simply.

Perhaps she realized that even if she lay down, she wouldn't be able to sleep. But it was still important to rest when possible. I dimmed the lamp further and lay down on the bed.

The sound of the rain was incredibly loud.

——I certainly wasn't going to get any deep sleep——

I opened my eyes in the darkness.

I didn't know how much time had passed since I lay down—but it wasn't dawn yet. The faint glow of the lamp, like a dying ember, only illuminated Marlene's silhouette as she crouched against the bed.

The only sounds were the rain and Marlene's breathing...

...Wait, she was asleep. This girl!

...I slowly raised my leg toward her—

Just as I launched a kick, she snapped upright. My foot hit nothing but air.

Tch. Lucky her. Or was she actually awake? Either way, it didn't matter now.

"—Are you awake, Lina-san?——" she whispered, her voice blending with the rain.

"Yeah," I whispered back.

Both she and I had noticed it. A presence approaching.

There were no footsteps, no creaking floorboards. Yet someone was definitely moving slowly toward us down the hallway, carrying a faint, undulating sense of hostility.

We held our breath and hid. The presence drew closer—

And went into the other room. The one we had been in originally—the one that had been blown up.

What business do they have in there?

As I wondered, the presence moved upward.

I see. They were going to use the attic of the ruined room to get above us.

Marlene looked up at a corner of the ceiling and put her hand on the hilt of her sword. "Give the signal. I'll cut through the ceiling. Blast them with a spell through the hole."

"Got it."

We exchanged low words. I sat up on the bed, chanted a spell under my breath—and tapped the bed with my fist.

Instantly, Marlene jumped!

She kicked off the floor and the bed, drawing her sword as she soared into the air. The blade reflected the dim light, carving an afterimage into the darkness.

Before she even landed—before the cut ceiling tile could even fall—I unleashed my spell into the hole she had made!

"Wind Wave Rubble Pressure!"

BOOM!

The inn's ceiling shook violently. A blast of wind roared out of the hole. It was a

spell that created high-pressure wind. It wasn't as lethal as a Fireball, but using something like that would have set the inn on fire.

"Did we hit!?"

"I don't know!"

By the time I answered Marlene, we were already out in the hallway. Even if the target had screamed, the sound would have been drowned out by the wind. All I knew for sure was that the presence was retreating in a panic.

We chased them down the hall—

THUD!

An explosion sounded from the first floor.

——Wait, again!?

We practically flew down the stairs—

There, in the first-floor dining lobby, the landlady was lying face-down, scorched, under the bright lamplight. The front door was half-open, swinging in the wind.

As if someone had just entered or left. But there was no longer any presence there.

I rushed to the landlady while Marlene ran to the door to check outside.

"...Nothing. No one's there," Marlene said.

"She's okay. ...Well, she’s unconscious," I added.

Presumably, after failing to ambush us, they had attacked the landlady on their way out.

...But...

What was this? Why did it feel so wrong? Something was bothering me.

"...I knew it... it *was* you..."

A low, hostile groan came from behind us.

I turned to see Addis and Tremer, who had apparently been drawn by the commotion. They glared at us with eyes full of rage and hatred.

"You did this, didn't you!?"

"No," Marlene said instantly.

But...

"There's no other explanation, is there?" Tremer added.

"Then let's settle this."

Addis flicked his wrists—and suddenly, a pair of large knives slid from his sleeves into his hands!

——Wait!? Hold on—

Before I could say a word, he lunged! His target was—me!

I kicked off the floor and jumped back. Marlene, who had been at the door, stepped in front of me.

"Calm down!"

Ignoring her, Addis lashed out with his blades. Right, left, up, down.

No way! He's fast!

Marlene drew her sword and managed to parry his strikes.

"Wait! Let's talk...!"

She tried to speak, but Addis wasn't listening. He pushed her back, sensing her hesitation.

...This is bad. For now, I have to stop him by force and then try to convince him. I chanted a spell—

"Ice Arrow!"

I unleashed a volley of frigid arrows, counting on Marlene to dodge!

But!

"Magic Wind!"

WHOOSH!

A violent gale whipped up, scattering my ice arrows!

——?

I looked around in shock at the person who had cast that spell—Tremer, the black-bearded merchant standing further back.

Of course, there was no law saying a traveler couldn't be a dual-knife wielder, and no rule saying a merchant couldn't use magic. But—

This was definitely not normal.

Tremer began chanting his next spell immediately. ...This is—!

"Marlene! We're retreating!"

I shouted as I chanted my own spell, circling toward the back of the dining room.

"U-understood!"

She dodged another attack and made a wide circle to join me.

Addis didn't chase her. Just as I thought.

As soon as Marlene and I were together—

"Fireball!"

Tremer unleashed his spell!

The ball of light would explode upon contact, scattering crimson flames—but I

knew exactly what was coming.

Ready!

I grabbed a nearby chair and hurled it at the incoming light. Just before they collided—

"Flame Crack Wall!"

I released my spell!

The chair hit the light. With a roar, the light burst and fire poured out—but at my palms, the flames split and flowed away to the sides.

Yes—as if the fire had built its own wall. I had used a spell to redirect the heat. A wall of fire stood before us, but I only felt a comfortable warmth.

The flames blocked the sight of Addis and Tremer—

"Outside, now!"

Marlene and I ran into the kitchen. We slammed the back door open and shut—

"Tch! Where are they!?"

"The kitchen!"

Their voices and footsteps drew near. The sound of the back door opening followed. But it was a rainy night; they couldn't see a thing.

"——Dammit!"

"It's impossible to track them in this. Whatever."

Marlene and I listened to their conversation—not from the darkness outside, but from within the lamp-lit room. We hadn't escaped; we had slammed the door on purpose and hidden nearby.

While they stared out into the darkness, we crept through the back of the kitchen. Eventually, we found a small door. Probably a pantry or a cellar.

I signaled to Marlene with my eyes and finger: *Let's hide in there*.

She nodded, and we crept over. We slipped inside and found a set of stairs leading down—it was indeed a cellar. Just as Addis and the others closed the back door, we softly closed ours.

There were no lamps here. In a darkness so thick I couldn't even see my own hand, we held our breath and listened for movement. The men muttered something to each other, but eventually, their voices and presences faded away.

...Well... we survived for now... the problem is what to do next. We couldn't leave just yet.

I drew my short sword and chanted a spell—

"Lighting."

I cast a low-intensity magical light onto the tip of the blade. The faint light

revealed a narrow, steep staircase sandwiched between plaster walls.

"...Let's go down for now and figure out our next move."

"Right."

We crept down the stairs. At the bottom was another small, rickety door. We opened it and found a small cellar filled with potatoes and onions.

"...This isn't exactly the best atmosphere for thinking."

"There seems to be another room further back," Marlene said. She crossed the room and opened the far door—

And stood still.

"What is it? Did you find a pink elephant?"

She kept her back to me. "Well... something like that."

"...Huh?"

I frowned and leaned over her shoulder—and I went speechless too.

In the magical light, we saw a large, sturdy stone cellar. It was packed with rows of swords, spears, and armor. Various types of weaponry and equipment reflected the silver light.

...Uh...

I checked outside the door instinctively—but of course, there was no sign for a weapon shop.

"It's like—no, it *is* an armory," Marlene whispered.

This place... was completely out of place in the basement of a small inn. Why was this here...?

...Wait... now that I think about it...

"Hey, Marlene, did your dad actually tell you more about this than you're letting on?"

"? What do you mean?"

"Think about it. At first, when we—"

Creak...

The sound of a door creaking interrupted me. Then—

"—Hey! Downstairs...!"

Addis's voice!

Dammit! They found us! If my hunch was correct, I knew what they would do next—

I quickly chanted a spell and ran into the inner room. I slammed my hand against the stone wall!

"Earth Spirit Way!"

A hole opened in the wall, and the night wind and rain blew in. It was a tunnel-digging spell. I had dug a hole straight through the wall to the surface.

"Marlene, this way!"

I climbed up through the hole, with Marlene right behind me. We scrambled out onto the ground, and a few steps away—

BOOM!

A pillar of fire erupted from the hole we had just left!

They had blasted the room with a Fireball or something similar, likely assuming it wouldn't damage the metal equipment.

I sheathed my glowing sword, extinguishing the light.

"That's it! We're taking those two down for real! Got it!?" I said in the darkness of the pouring rain.

"What? But they're..."

"Explanations later! They'll be here any second!"

Before I could even finish—

FLASH!

"——!?"

A brilliant light blinded us. A Lighting spell—short duration, high intensity!

I heard someone rushing toward us through the mud. I managed to open my eyes, but my vision hadn't recovered. Since they were closing the distance, it was likely the knife-wielder, Addis—

Marlene, illuminated by the light, ran toward the silhouette that appeared to be Addis. ...But I doubted her vision had recovered in such a short time either. A proper sword fight would be impossible.

I chanted a spell—

"Ice Arrow!"

The cold arrows I unleashed flew far over Addis’s head into the dark void.

"Ha! You missed by a mile!" Addis mocked.

"—Idiot! Move!" Tremer’s voice barked from somewhere—but it was too late.

Rattle-clatter!

"Gah!?"

A shower of rubble fell from above—the rain I had turned into large hailstones with my ice spell. As he flinched, Marlene dashed past and struck him in the solar plexus with the scabbard of her sword.

Addis collapsed into the mud with a splash.

By now, my vision had mostly returned. Standing a short distance away in the magical light was Tremer.

"—Tch!"

Seeing the tide had turned, he spun around and bolted into the darkness.

Tracking someone in this rain and darkness was impossible. ——Normally.

But now, we had a secret weapon!

I took a deep breath—and shouted at the top of my lungs:

"Dad! He's all yours!"

"—Eh?" Marlene’s eyes went wide.

Instantly—

THUD.

An attack spell flying out of the darkness blasted the fleeing Tremer.

"...What!?"

Marlene was lost in confusion. I stood there calmly in the rain.

Finally, from the darkness—

"—Well, thank you for your help again. It was... Lina-san, wasn't it? But when did you realize?"

The man who emerged was an unremarkable middle-aged man—Marlene’s father, whom I had seen once before.

"The first thing I thought was weird was when nobody complained," I said.

We had tied up Tremer and Addis and returned to the inn. Once again, we had changed into dry clothes and were sipping hot tea in the dining room.

"I thought they complained quite a bit," Marlene said, sipping her own tea beside me. Her father sat across from us, watching our conversation with a smile.

"They said 'you did this,' sure," I replied. "But remember, we lied and said we were military investigators. If Tosh had been blown up by someone, wouldn't normal people assume the perpetrator was related to the investigation? Wouldn't they want to know more about the case? But nobody asked us to explain what we were investigating. Even the landlady didn't seem particularly bothered that one of her rooms—a very important asset—had been blown up. She just said she didn't want any trouble when we went to look for the attacker. No matter how you look at it, it was bizarre."

"...Well... when you put it that way..."

I looked at her father. "This is just a guess... but Tosh was the one who attacked our room. And you were the one who took him down, weren't you?"

"Hahaha. Spot on," her father said with a plain smile.

Marlene, still not fully understanding, looked back and forth between us. I turned to her.

"Basically, this was a test for you that also served as your father's job. Every single person in this inn—except for us—was a criminal. Right?"

"Impressive," her father said. "We heard this place was a hideout for guerrillas and decided to do something about it."

I see. That explains the armory in the basement.

"But since it also functions as an inn, it was hard to tell who was a guerrilla and who was a regular guest. So, I decided to throw my daughter in as a test of skill to see if she could tell the difference. I didn't expect to find Lina-san here, though."

He said it with a perfectly straight face. That was why he gave Marlene that vague message—to make her act suspiciously and provoke paranoia among the guerrillas.

"And without knowing anything, we went and lied about being investigators," I told Marlene. "Naturally, they thought we were there to bust them. They decided to get rid of us before we realized everyone was a guerrilla—so Tosh attacked us first and failed. At that point, your dad knew he was one of them and took him down. The landlady knew her comrade Tosh had blown up the room, so she didn't complain to us about it. But since the others didn't know about your dad, they thought we were the ones who took down Tosh. Then the landlady tried to ambush us from the attic and failed—and your dad took her down too. Finally, Addis and Tremer realized the jig was up and decided to face us head-on."

That was the whole story.

"...I... I see..." Marlene nodded slowly, finally understanding.

...Well, in the end, I was dancing to her father's tune too, but I'll let it slide. I got my fee from Marlene, and I didn't end up having to fight her parents.

But as for Marlene...

"But Marlene, you still have a long way to go."

At her father’s words, she flinched. She looked at him, trembling slightly.

"...E-um... Father...?"

"I won't say you were useless, but you clearly had no idea what was going on, and you just followed Lina-san’s lead the whole time."

"No, but Father! I judged that Lina-san could compensate for my shortcomings and I insisted on making her an ally!"

"Yes, you did," her father said with a smile. "With persistence... and the cash I gave you."

This man saw through everything.

"Finding allies isn't a bad thing. But Lina-san won't always be there for you. If you just leave everything to your allies and act on impulse, you won't be able to do

anything when you can't find a 'reliable ally.' That's not good enough. You need to become much more capable, Marlene. We're going to retrain you when we get home."

"But Father—"

Her protest, which was almost a scream, was cut short. Her father had moved beside her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you for everything, Lina-san. Now, let's head home, Marlene."

With that, he yanked her away by the shoulder.

"HIIIIIIIIEEEEEE!"

With a thin scream and the creak of the front door, Marlene and her father vanished into the rainy night.

——I suddenly realized——

The tied-up guerrillas were gone too. Her father must have moved them while Marlene and I were changing. Truly a man not to be underestimated.

And so, I was the only one left.

——The rain showed no sign of stopping——

(Shocking! The Emotional Inn of the Rain: The End)

Afterword:

Author: A haiku. "A new book / the scent of paper / so vivid."
L: "Is it a celebration or isn't it?"
Author: "It's not a celebration!? Also, don't just add a closing line in *Shoten* style!"
L: "Just felt like it."
Author: "Anyway... I present to you *Slayers Special* Volume 20, *Mission Possible*."
L: "Yeah, yeah. Congratulations, congratulations."
Author: "Wow, that was dismissive. Speaking of dismissive, they recently introduced women-only cars on the JR line near where I live during commuting hours... and honestly, the way they just slapped stickers all over the cars seems a bit lazy."
L: "Well, the world has a cold reality called a budget."
Author: "I know, but... because of that, men might accidentally get on, or men might 'accidentally' get on with ulterior motives."
L: "...Oh... so you got on one, didn't you, Author...?"
Author: "...! I was reading a book and... but it was outside the restricted hours, so it was treated as a normal car. I just thought some people might make that mistake during commuting hours. I wish they'd change the color of the car itself so you could tell at a glance."
L: "Like pink with a floral pattern?"
Author: "I don't know about that design, but something like that. But it's unfair, isn't it? Only women get a dedicated car."
L: "I mean... unfair?"
Author: "It's 'dedicated'! 'Dedicated'! I'm jealous—it feels like it should be red and three times faster! ...Sigh... this is why the people who watched G*ndam in real-time... So, you're saying you're jealous and you want a men-only car too?"
Author: "Yeah."
L: "And for the design, so you can tell at a glance, it should be black with patterns of macho middle-aged men posing?"
Author: "Actually, never mind. I don't want a sweaty-looking thing like that. ...Let's just forget that terrifying image that flashed through my mind... Anyway, next!"

L: "The usual New Year's card announcement?"
Author: "Yep! This year's card was drawn by me, as usual."

"L in a Sheep Hat (Chibi Version)"

"The image was also uploaded to the *Dragon Magazine* official website for a few days during the New Year. It probably goes without saying, but the 'A.H.N.Y.' on the card stands for... wait, why are you slowly approaching me from behind with a coping saw while I'm introducing the New Year's card?"

L: "I figured there was going to be a terrible punchline. Are you ready?"
Author: "I don't need that kind of preparation! There's no punchline this time!"
L: "Ehhhhh~ no punchline?"

Author: "Why do you sound disappointed? At first, I thought about doing something with 'sheep' (*hitsuji*) like 'butler' (*shitsuji*) or 'desperate' (*hisshi*), but I couldn't get the idea or the composition right. So I just decided to draw fluffy clothes."
L: "Tch. I prepared the saw because I was sure there'd be a punchline."
Author: "Put it away! If I had to give a hidden setting, the way the sheep hat was made was 'behead a sheep, eat the meat and bones from the neck up, and it's finished when you eat through the skin of the face'..."
L: "Terrifying! That card isn't celebratory at all!"
Author: "By the way, if you want to know what happened to the rest of the body, just look at how huge the BBQ skewer in her right hand is."
L: "That's a skewer!?"
Author: "Considering the character wearing it, that's a natural setting. But speaking of mutton, the local supermarket stopped carrying lamb recently and it's sad. It's an acquired taste, but with plenty of pepper... Anyway, I'm sure the UN highly appreciates you putting away the saw, but why are you now taking out an electric sander?"
L: "I thought this might hurt more."

(Limit of freedom of expression exceeded)

L: "These days, it's a lot of work to clean a clogged sander. How is everyone doing? The idiom 'to work oneself into powder' (*mi o ko ni shite hataraku*)—I don't think it refers to the author's current state, but I wonder where that phrase came from. Oh well. Anyway, that's it for now. See you in the next *Special*!"

(Afterword: The End)